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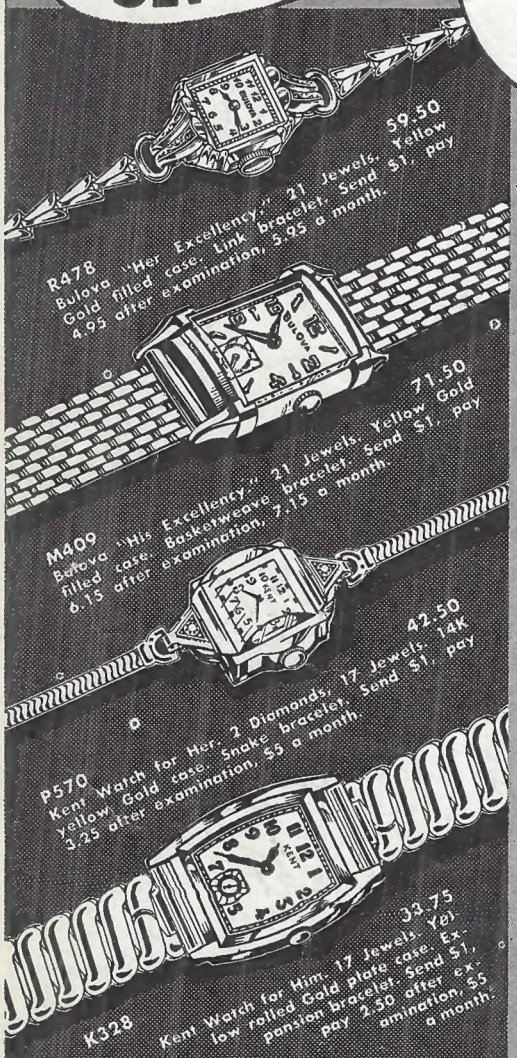

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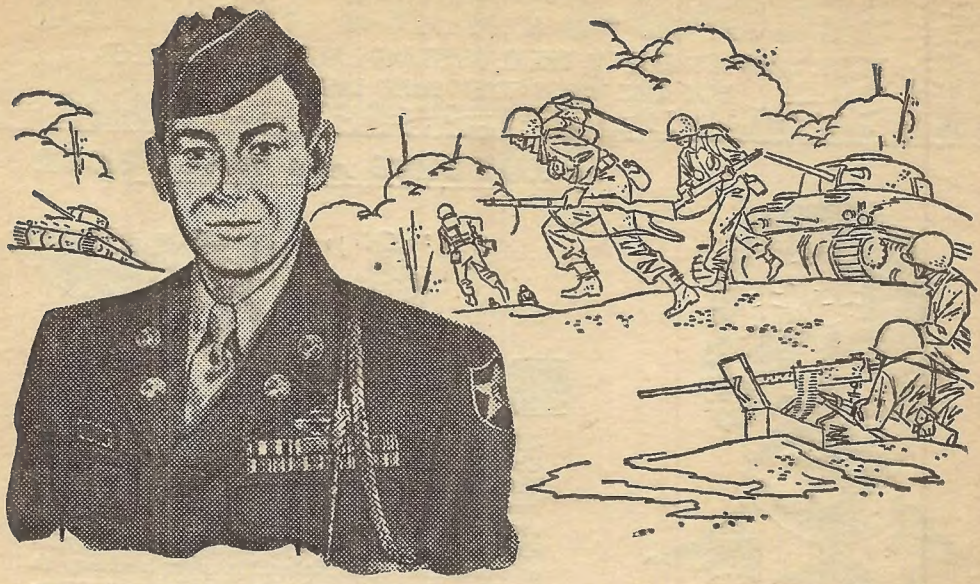

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SECOND-STRING HEROES

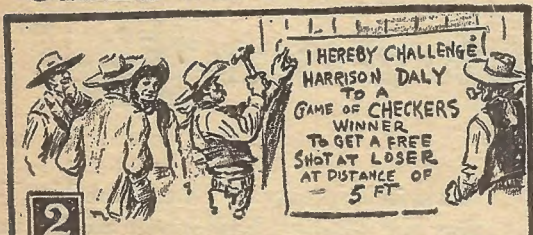
THEIR SADDLES EMPTY, THEIR GUNS AND LAUGHTER STILLED, BUT THE WEST THEY BUILT LIVES ON.

by ROBBINS AND WAGGENER

GILES HAYES

1

Giles Hayes was elected Sheriff of Fire Acres, Calif., in 1868 not because he was a brave man but because he was a whiz with a checker board. Harrison Daly, a local outlaw who stubbornly refused to be captured, was also a checker fiend. "Perhaps," reasoned the quixotic voters of Fire Acres, "it takes a champ to catch a champ," and they handed the somewhat reluctant Hayes his star.



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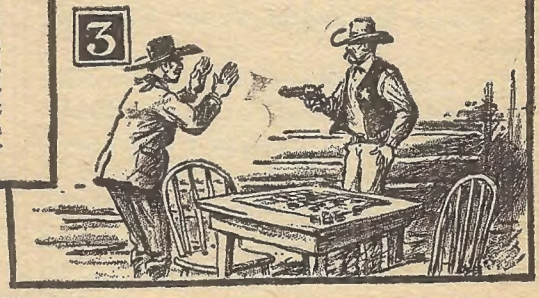
The new lawman was quite frankly terrified of the bandit, but at the same time he was very desirous of meeting him. He nailed up a poster challenging Harrison to a checker contest with stakes that were literally life and death—the loser to give the winner a free shot at five feet. The game that resulted between the outlaw and the sheriff was a tense one, but victory went to Hayes.

Instead of killing Harrison, as the gentlemanly bandit was prepared to allow, Hayes arrested him and saw him sentenced to 40 years in the state prison. He then settled down, wed a school-teacher, and experienced little more of note until old age caught up with him and he began to go blind.



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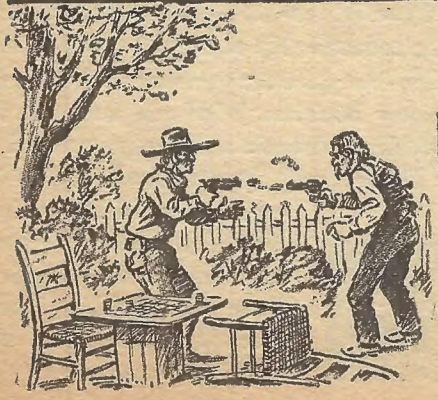

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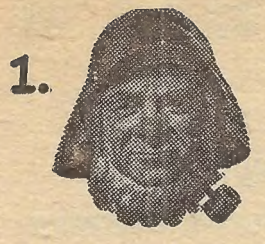
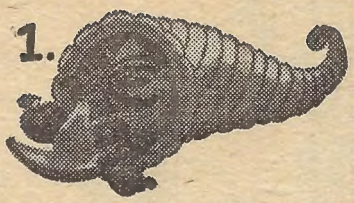
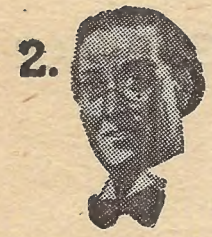
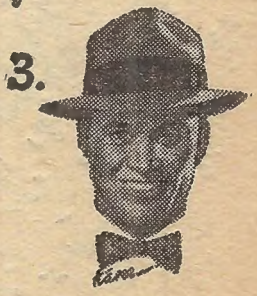
One morning while he was sitting in the garden, seeing only a vague yellow cloud instead of bright sunshine, he heard footsteps pause at his chair. A checker board was laid on his lap and Harrison Daly's well remembered voice said softly, "It's time for the playoff!" The two were found early the next morning, both dead with bullets that had been fired together at close range. On the fatal checker board were the red and black counters—stalemated!









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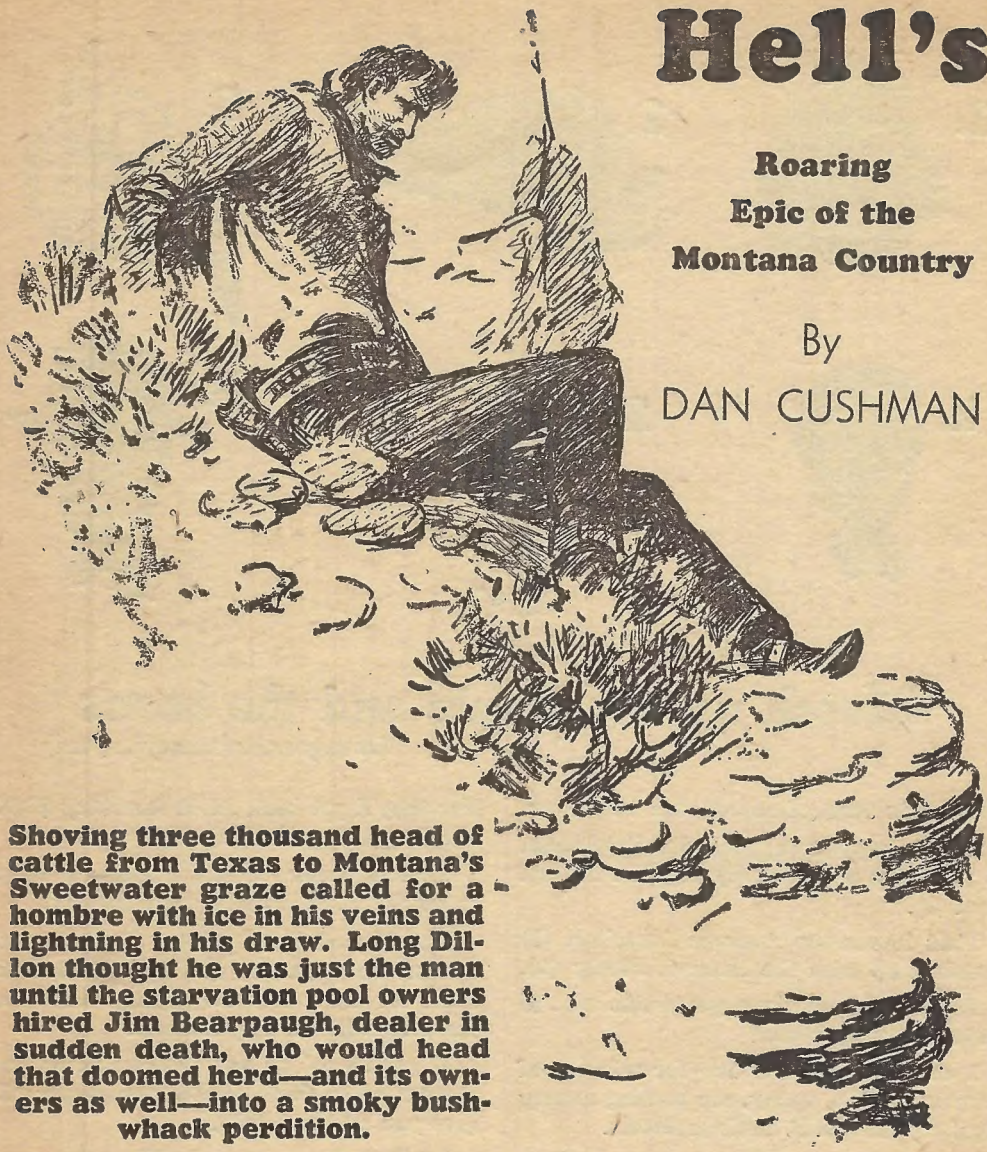
Hell's

Roaring Epic of the Montana Country

By DAN CUSHMAN



Shoving three thousand head of cattle from Texas to Montana's Sweetwater graze called for a hombre with ice in his veins and lightning in his draw. Long Dillon thought he was just the man until the starvation pool owners hired Jim Bearpaugh, dealer in sudden death, who would head that doomed herd—and its owners as well—into a smoky bushwhack perdition.

LONG DILLON had paused just inside the Antlers Saloon, McKetrick, Wyoming Territory. He let the bat-wing doors slap-slap behind him while his narrowed eyes swept the room.

Long Dillon was twenty-seven, though he looked older standing there in the slanting light from coal-oil lamps. His skin was leathery from too much New Mexico sun and Montana winter. He had a long face, hard, but still it was a face that the women down in "Calico Lane" were known to look at a bit wistfully.

Lefty Forbes, the plump and pinkish young man who came in with him spoke,

"Ken ain't here."

"He'll come."

Long Dillon ordered beers and carried the steins over to an unused card table. He walked spavined and stiff legged, with

Own Trail Drive

Bearpaugh went hurtling, screaming, into the path of that maddened herd.

his Levis sticking to the insides of his legs and his star-roweled spurs scraping the floor showing he'd ridden too damned far since flapjacks. He hooked a chair with the toe of one choke-bore boot and the two men sat down.

"Nice appurtenances," said Lefty. He'd once been snowed in at Jackson Hole with no reading matter except a copy of the New Era Dictionary, and the experience had made his speech at times incomprehensible. The "appurtenances" he referred to was a life-size painting of a naked woman which surmounted the bar.

Long Dillon looked at the picture with narrowed, critical eyes while drinking down his beer. "Women don't stay shaped like that without their stays on. Anyhow, she's too skim-milk and flabby-lookin' to suit me. I like Blackfeet gals, myself. Pretty, and black-eyed, and all hell and vinegar on a horse."

Lefty took a snoose box from his pocket, twisted off the lid, and looked at the Ingersoll dollar watch inside.

"Half past nine," he complained.

"He'll be here, so just keep the seat of your britches cool. Order yourself another beer, if you can take two and still keep sober."

Dillon talked from one side of his mouth keeping a burnt-out cigarette scissored in the other—talked in the mean, brittle tone he always used with his friends. It was when Dillon smoothed down with a voice as soft as antelope buckskin that a man was smart to go easy.

They sat there, having a second beer, as the minutes stretched on and no sign of Ken Roos, and no sign of Charley Grace, the big Texan they'd sent to look for him.

The night was quieter than most nights at the Antlers. There were maybe a dozen others in the big room. A faro spread was moving along with four men bucking its percentage. There was a stud game with several chairs vacant. A broad, handsome man of forty put down his copy of the *Cheyenne Sun* after reading Bill Nye's column, and stood up.

Only a slight narrowing of Dillon's eyes indicated that he had met the man before.

"Who is he?" Lefty asked.

"Jim Bearpaugh."

"The hell!"

EVERYONE had heard of Jim Bearpaugh, though few newcomers to Wyoming knew him by sight, since he'd been spending the last several years in the seclusion of the Kansas state penitentiary. Bearpaugh was once a freight operator, and he'd fought it out with the Two-Diamond to control the Bozeman Trail—a fight that he'd lost after giving a try to every Injun tactic that he or his bushwhack gang could devise.

Bearpaugh crossed the room with an unhurried walk, watching Dillon, a smile touching his heavy-handsome face. Always before Dillon had seen him dressed in store clothes of serge or Scotch-rough, but tonight he had on a fringed buckskin shirt, and foxed California pants. The shirt did something for his big, easy swinging shoulders.

He stopped close enough so Dillon could smell the oil of violets pomade the barber had recently put in his hair.

"Well, Dillon!" He had a good voice. A man could run for congress with Bearpaugh's voice. He extended his hand. A diamond large as a bead on the faro abacus had twinkled there the last time Dillon had seen him, but the finger was unadorned now. "No hard feelings?"

Dillon made no sign of noticing the hand. Instead he looked in Bearpaugh's eyes, and spoke in his smooth, dangerous voice,

"Do you think you can sponge off the slate that easy?"

Bearpaugh drew the hand back. Anger had darkened his face, but he smiled with

a bitter twist of his strong, handsome lips.

"You still blame me for Calahan's death."

"Calahan, and a few more that got lead in their guts bushwhack fashion."

"I served three years in Kansas prison."

"They'd have hung you in Colorado."

Bearpaugh drew a chair over and sat down. He was heavy enough to make the chair creak. Over behind the bar, raw-boned Rance Bruckner was pyramiding glasses and watching in the backbar mirror. Bruckner owned the Antlers, and he owned cattle up along the Belle Fourche, too. And there was a bucktoothed lad lounging with one shoulder against the wall, pretending to watch the faro game. A man gets so he can read saloon sign as well as trail sign after he's followed the big herds to Abeline, Dodge, Cheyenne, and Miles.

Bearpaugh said, "Lots of people start over in this country. Lucky for both of us that the country has a short memory."

Dillon lifted his glass to look at the ring of wet it had left on the dirty green cloth, and when he answered his voice was so smooth that Lefty shot him an alarmed glance,

"You're talking about that rustlin' charge they had on me in New Mexico, aren't you?"

Bearpaugh didn't follow it up. He got his elbows propped on the table the way a man does when he wants to show how far his hands are from his gun, and how there's nothing but fellowship in his heart. Though of course there was always the buck-toothed lad by the faro spread. . . .

Bearpaugh said, "I been sort of waiting for you to show up."

"That's what I guessed." Then Dillon asked, "Where's Ken Roos?"

"How should I know?" Bearpaugh got back to his subject. "First of all, let me say I know why you're here. Roos figures it's safe to drive this trail herd of his to the Sweetwater now that Brigadier Merriweather has licked Yellowtail and his Crows up on the Medicine Horn. He knew you could guide him, so he sent Charley Grace up the trail ahead of his herd to bring you down here. However, there's something you may not know. It's this—Ken Roos is only half owner of those Texas cattle. The other half is owned by Lawrence Frost of Chicago. I guess it surprised Ken a little bit when he found Frost and his daughter waiting for him when he moved the herd up to McKetrick last week.

"Now here's the point—Mr. Frost had already made a private agreement with me. He doesn't intend to stay in the country, and I'm to be his general manager. Your coming will be bad for both of us, so . . ." Bearpaugh spread his big hands expressively. "Of course Frost expects to pay you for your trouble in coming."

Bearpaugh drew out a long leather poke and emptied a little heap of gold pieces on the table. "There's four hundred dollars. I didn't know there would be two of you, so you can split it any way you like."

"I see." Even the downy surface of a sage leaf couldn't have been softer than Dillon's voice. He sat with chin cupped in one hand, an elbow on the table, looking at the little heap of gold. Without warning, his hand swung out, batting the coins so they jingled to the floor and rolled in a dozen directions across the room. Then he spoke to Bearpaugh, his voice having just a little more edge to it, "If you don't mind, Lefty and I are used to good, fresh prairie air and you have a skunk smell we don't like."

* * *

Bearpaugh rose, booting his chair across the floor behind him. A pearl-handled Smith and Wesson .44 was strapped below his fringed buckskin shirt,

and for an instant it seemed that his hand was trembling for it. He looked down at Dillon who was leaning back in his chair, loose and relaxed. Then he took a deep breath, controlling himself.

"You always did have a bad disposition, Dillon."

Activity at the faro spread had paused, and even those at the far end of the bar had stopped talking to listen. Bearpaugh was about to say something else, but he changed his mind and turned abruptly, standing with his heavy legs spread and back turned to Dillon while a little, gray swamper scurried around the room gathering gold pieces. He let the swamper count them out, grudgingly handing over two-bits for his trouble.

The buck-toothed lad had left the faro game and gone outside. Rawboned Rance Bruckner stood with his hands out of sight behind the bar. Bearpaugh walked past without glancing at Bruckner. The vague outline of the bucktoothed kid could be seen over the batwings.

"Two-bits!" Dillon said. "I've seen the day when Bearpaugh's standard tip was a five-dollar gold piece. Why, he'd ride into a town like this with a private army big enough to whip all the deputy sheriffs in Iowa." He grinned over at Lefty. "It wouldn't been healthy to tell him to go to hell in those days."

"I wish Ken Roos would come. It's after ten o'clock now."

"Sure," Dillon said, getting his long frame up from the chair. "I reckon we better ride some of the blind breaks in this town lookin' for him."

THE TOWN of McKetrick was less than five years grown from the Wyoming prairie and already warping from lack of paint. A jerkline bull outfit was dimly visible, strung out, waiting to be unyoked by the Far West Transportation Company storehouse. Here and there a platform sidewalk or a strip of alkali-white street dust was lighted by a saloon window.

Dillon and Lefty stopped and waited while Charley Grace came toward them with his broken-down cowboy walk.

"Nobody seen him since supper," he said, referring to Ken Roos. "You want me to saddle up and hit for the camp? It's three or four miles out across the flat."

Dillon said no. He told Grace to eat his supper, and led Lefty on a round of the town. A couple of Square and Circle riders were at the Blue Chip, but no sign of Roos. That was Roos' old Texas brand—the Square and Circle.

They'd already visited the Stockman's Rest, but now they went back. The place had a register, a big leather and mahogany book on a swivel with a silver plated bell suspended over it like a man might expect in Denver.

"Lawrence T. Frost, Chicago, Ill."—there was his signature. Right over it somebody had scrawled, "Rutherford B. Hayes, President, Washington D. C., stall number seven", showing how seriously some guests took the register.

The clerk had written "room 16" back of Frost's name. Dillon and Lefty climbed the stairs. There was a hall lighted by a beef-tallow dip in a nickeled reflector, and opposite it an unpainted pine door with the number "16" put on with paint that looked like tar.

Dillon rapped, and an unfamiliar, nasal voice said, "Come in."

It was a big room, furnished better than any man had a right to expect in a town like McKetrick where a hotel is likely to be one jump worse than the livery barn.

Jim Bearpaugh was standing beyond a table with a coal oil lamp underlighting his strong face. A gaunt man with hair and skin both grayish stood up as Dillon entered. At one side, sitting on a couch with feet tucked under her, was a slim tall girl with bronze colored hair.

It was chiefly the girl Dillon looked at. It wasn't often you saw her type of woman on the long trail that ran from Brazos to Yellowstone.

She noticed the length of his gaze, and smiled with a half-contemptuous twist of her lips.

"I always like 'em tall and skinny," Dillon said.

"Sir!" barked the grayish man.

Dillon took his time, and when he was ready shifted his eyes over. "Frost?" he asked.

"Yes. "I'm Frost."

"Dillon. Long Dillon. This is my partner, Lefty Forbes. Roos sent for us to take the herd through to Sweetwater. Where is he?"

"Roos?"

"Of course. Ken Roos. He's your partner. Remember?"

"Well, he's not here obviously."

"Men in this country sometimes get their heads shot off for not answering civil questions. I don't intend to do it, understand, but—"

"If you're trying to frighten me—"

"I ain't." Dillon lounged across the room. He still has his spurs on, and they made a jingling sound. The lines that sun and wind had stamped at the corners of his lips and eyes looked deep in the yellowish light that the lamp sent across his face. Reaching the table, he turned and looked at the girl again.

He said, "You can always tell the difference between a natural sorrel and a gal that dyes her hair red, because the real ones have the catamount disposition that goes with it."

The remark seemed to anger Frost more than it did the red-headed girl who was evidently his daughter. He spoke, fighting to keep a tremble from his voice,

"If you're the guide Roos sent for, then your business is with him. Good-night."

"Going to bed?" Dillon asked. "Now I hate to have you miss any sleep on my account, but there's a little something I came up here to talk about. Why was it worth four hundred dollars to you just to get me out of town? Four hundred is mighty nigh a year's wages for a cowboy."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know—that four hundred your *general manager*, Mr. Bearpaugh, offered me to saddle and take it down the long coulee."

Bearpaugh laughed. "What I really did was offer to pay him for some stock that he had killed during that freight line trouble I told you about."

Dillon let a laugh jerk his shoulders, but he didn't bother to argue.

Frost said, "Sir! I'll now *ask* you to leave this room."

"I'll go when I'm damned good and ready."

"Please! There's a woman in—"

"I noticed. But 'damn' is a pretty good word just the same. Picked it up out of the Bible. Used a considerable hereabouts. Any gal fresh comin' to Wyoming Territory should learn it first chance she gets."

"Damn!" the girl said with a spiteful twist of her lips. "Damn! That *is* a good word. I'd like to use it on you. Before calling on human beings you should take your *damned spurs off!*"

"Ella!" her father cried.

Bearpaugh said, "But she's right! No gentleman would go in a parlor with his spurs on."

"So they're producing gentleman at Kansas state pen these days!"

Frost asked, "Did you come here to start a fight?"

"No. I came looking for Ken Roos. He promised to meet me more than an hour ago. But he didn't show up, while Bearpaugh *did*. I wouldn't like anything to happen to Ken. He's a good lad."

Bearpaugh raised his voice: "What do you mean—happen to him?"

"I mean you have a bushwhack reputa-

tion. And once a bushwhacker, always a bushwhacker."

BEARPAUGH was standing with one corner of the table between himself and Dillon. He moved aside, and for an instant it looked as though he intended to turn his back and walk away. Instead he whirled, shifted his legs wide, and his right came with the swinging strength of a sledge.

But Bearpaugh's strength kept him from getting the fist up quite quick enough, and Dillon weaved a little, making the blow graze jaw and cheek.

Frost was shouting, but Bearpaugh did not hear him. He'd controlled the fury of his temper as long as he was able. He charged on, driving his left fist for the groin, swinging an overhand right for the jaw.

Dillon shifted. He took the first blow glancing on a hip, made the second miss completely.

Bearpaugh staggered off balance. Dillon set himself, and hesitated a fragment of time while Bearpaugh started around, and threw a swift one-two. The man's massive head snapped to one side, stringing dark pomaded hair over his face.

Bearpaugh didn't go down. He back pedaled, trying to catch his balance and slammed the wall so hard the room shook, making the lamp dance on the table. He started to lunge back, but Frost leaped in front of him.

"Get out of here!" Frost shouted, turning on Dillon.

Dillon opened and closed his right hand, looking at skinned and bleeding knuckles. Lefty had opened the door and stood with hand resting on his six-shooter, his eyes on Bearpaugh.

Men's voices broke in on them, coming from the stairs. There was a stamp of many boots. A big, red-whiskered man with a bullwhacker's smell on his clothes was backing up the stairs, bending far over, trying to carry an upended bench on an even keel. Two men were below, lifting the bench overhead. The bench was being used for a stretcher, a man lying in the depression formed by sides and ends. The man was Ken Roos.

The bullwhacker wheezed and took time to spatter a mouthful of tobacco juice across the floor.

"Whar's his room?"

"Here. I'll open his door." It was the girl. She ran down the hall.

Roos was conscious. His eyes focused on Dillon and he tried to sit up.

"Stay whar y'are!" bellowed the bullwhacker.

They carried him to his room and put the bench down on one side of the bed.

"Don't reckon we ought to hist him. Might have busted his neck and it'd kill him. We been damn fools to bring him this far."

Ken lay on his back looking at Dillon. "So you came," he said, trying to smile. Ordinarily he was a good-looking kid—dark-haired with a white skin, but tonight he looked like something the grizzlies had worked over.

"What happened, kid?" Dillon asked.

"Wish I knew. I was headed across that vacant lot by the Chink cafe when all of a sudden my brains seemed to explode. I came around a while back with somebody pouring Cherokee linament down my throat."

"Bottled-in-bond, damn-ee," the bullwhacker said.

Dillon could see that his pockets had been turned inside out, either to rob him, or make it look like robbery.

Ella Frost came in carrying warm water from the hotel kitchen and began sponging blood and dirt. Her hand trembled a little. She didn't seem quite like the girl that had been so spirited and arrogant a few minutes ago.

"Ken!" she kept whispering. "Oh, Ken!"

Ken Roos smiled again, this time doing a better job of it. He was a handsome kid, and likeable, too, despite his short-fuse temper.

"You'll be all right," she whispered.

"I'm all right now."

In half an hour young Doc Benefield got there, felt Ken's shoulders and neck, and bandaged him on a segment of padded plank. "Scapula fractured," he said.

"What's that?" Ken said.

"Shoulder blade. You must have got one arm up by reflex just as the blow landed, and that took some of the force away from your spine. Anyhow you'll be on your back for a while."

"How long?"

He shrugged. "A month."

"The devil I will!" Ken started to get up, but pain made him fall back.

"Here," said the doctor. "Help me get him in bed."

Dillon walked down the hall. The door to Frost's room was barely ajar. He could hear Bearpaugh's voice—

" . . . I can see how it looks for me. Finding him there, slugged, just after Dillon accused me of bushwhacking him. But it was too pat, too good. Did it occur to you—"

"I haven't accused you," Frost said shortly. "I don't doubt the man has enemies. He and his short temper. Or perhaps it was robbery."

Dillon walked in. There was an abrupt silence as he walked to the lamp and lighted his burnt-out cigarette in the heat ascending from the chimney. Light, coming from beneath, accentuated the hard lines of his face.

He looked around. The girl wasn't there.

"What happened, Bearpaugh? Make a mistake and not hit him hard enough? Gun make too much noise? You're slipping since the old days. Or were you just trying to chill him long enough so you'd get the first word with me over at the Antlers? Speak up, damn it! Which is it?"

"I want no more trouble!" Frost said.

Dillon nodded. "Ken tells me you want to go north to the Belle Fourche because you're afraid of the Cheyennes and Crows on the Sweetwater."

"And you say there's no danger of them on the Sweetwater!" Bearpaugh said with a smug twist of his lips.

Dillon went on in his buckskin-smooth voice, "If a man wants to be safe from Injuns, he'd best stay in Chicago. Injuns are likely to raid cattle anywhere between here and the Montana gold camps now that the buffalo are scarce. Men got to eat, even Injuns. I don't think they'll be any more danger on the Sweetwater than on the Bell Fourche or the Powder. It's all a gamble, but the Sweetwater is the best strip of grass this side of Oregon, and it'd be gone a long time ago if it hadn't been for that Yellowtail. It'll be a long drive getting there, and some dry sleeps, but I think we can make it without losing too many of them mossyhorns."

Bearpaugh said, "Yes, Frost, and when it comes time to ship that beef hog-fat on Sweetwater grass, all you need to do is drive them three hundred miles south to Green River on the U. P."

"The Northern Pacific's running its survey along the Yellowstone and that'll bring steel within a hundred miles of the Sweetwater."

"If it goes through!"

Frost said, "It will—with Villard promoting it."

Bearpaugh cried, "You aren't letting this fellow—"

"*I'll* decide!" The force of Frost's words surprised Dillon. Spots of color had appeared in his grayish cheeks. "I wasn't fool enough to expect a sure thing when I came West. I was looking for a gamble. A *good* gamble. I'll talk it over with Roos. Tomorrow morning. I want no more talk now."

CHAPTER TWO

Hell's Hammer Hold

KEN ROOS lay on his back, looking at his room's beaverboard ceiling and spoke his way through every cuss-word from Texas to Milk River. When he was through he seemed to feel better. He asked for Dillon's makings and rolled one.

"You take 'em through for me, Dillon," he said. "You take them longhorns and put 'em belly deep in Sweetwater grass. They're all that's left of the old Square and Circle."

"What if this scissorbill Frost won't drift with us?"

"Whenever Frost gets his rump to pushin' the crouper and the bit spit out of his teeth, you just tally the herd and take my half to the Sweetwater and let him run his half over the badacres of hell if he wants. But he won't split, Dillon. He's an orney bushway son, but he's scared to go it alone. And the girl—she'll talk to him."

"She can't talk to him after we leave McKetrick."

"Like the hairy old hell she can't! She's a snorter, that unbranded filly. You could no more leave her behind than you could leave that Injun blood of yours, Dillon. She and her pappy and a slanty-eyed cook are trailin' up in a Conestoga. I sort of like that gal. You'll look after her for me."

"I'll do my best."

"And get that herd to the Sweetwater. If Bearpaugh gets too rough, you gutshoot him, but look out for the Bucktooth Kid. He's dumb and a killer. That's a bad combination—no brains and a likin' to kill. Get 'em to the Sweetwater, and I'll cut for a fourth."

"I'll put 'em through, and you can take your fourth and go to hell. A man with property is a man tied down. The last time I got tied down was by a New Mexico posse, and it didn't feel good."

Ken asked him to stick around the hotel till he'd argued it out with Frost.

Dillon was down on the porch, sitting on his tailbone with his spurs dug in the railing when Frost finally came downstairs.

Frost said, "Sure you can take us to the Sweetwater?"

"I reckon." Frost started on without saying more, but Dillon called, making him turn. "How about Bearpaugh?"

Frost walked back. He had a hawklike way of looking at a man. "I'll not be able to stay through the winter. My health won't stand it. Bearpaugh is my general manager. So he's going along, of course. But you'll have complete charge of guiding the herd. Roos and I shook hands on it."

"All right, but if that greasy-haired bushwhacker tries to copper any of my bets I'll make wolf meat of him, and you can pass that information along."

* * *

Trail-lean cattle burned with the Square and Circle brand were scattered along five miles of McKetrick Creek, with nobody watching them. The only one in camp was a Mex kid asleep under the wagon.

"Where in hell are the boys?" Dillon asked. "Isn't anyone riding herd on these dogies?"

"Thees dogies don' run, *senor*," he grinned. "Texas cow, he no run weeth belly full grass."

"Where's the cook?"

"He quit. Everybody quit. Johnny, Alvees, Tom Quinn—all the boys quit when thees Señor Bearpaugh be beeg boss. Ride off weeth Two Dot outfit for Montana. Jus' me, I stay. I try get job, but that damn trail boss—"

"They're gone?"

"Hell-n-gone. Sure. Gone to Yellowstone. You ever see thees Yellowstone, señor?"

Dillon didn't know whether the boys had quit, or whether Bearpaugh had told them to get their bedrolls and drift.

In the evening Bearpaugh rode out with the new crew—seven cowboys and a cook. They were Texans, mostly, left stranded by other outfits but probably good enough with cows once the alcohol was worked out of their systems.

Bearpaugh swung down from his big bay and walked over to the cookfire where Dillon and Lefty were hunkered, drinking scalding coffee from tin cups. Bearpaugh stopped and held out a cup for the Mex kid to pour coffee in and then spoke.

"We'll get going tomorrow. Frost and the girl are going along. They'll be out in the Conestoga tonight or early tomorrow. It'll take us a while to work this brush and make a tally. Good enough?"

"Good enough," said Dillon.

The Conestoga rolled out about daybreak. It was a big wagon with a sway-back canvas top, and there was a supply wagon trailing her. Driving was Red Andros, the same bullwhacker who had helped carry Roos upstairs two nights before.

It was dusty hot in the first week of September, but the cattle had rested and filled their bellies with water and rich buffalo grass that grew along McKetrick Creek, so they went well enough, following the north trail all the first day and half the next. There Dillon pointed them west across the trailless undulations of Wyoming with the Big Horns making purple breaks in the horizon to the north, and the Wind River range rising uncertain, almost like mirage, beyond the prairie rim far to the west.

Dillon had planned to spend the night on Lame Tom Creek, but the creek bottom was dry, cracked dirt. He went on, through twilight and the hours of early darkness, finally locating soup-hole water at Niss-kay-ho Springs.

Niss-kay-ho wasn't much water for a herd the size of that Square and Circle outfit, and in a quarter-hour its ten acres of potholes had been churned to thin mud.

Dillon had turned his horse over to the nighthawk at the rope corral when he heard Frost's voice coming from the dark. The man was walking towards him from the Conestoga.

"I thought you said you'd find plenty of water by sundown."

"God don't always put water right where a cowboy's lookin' for it in this country, Frost. In fact, some folks say God didn't have nothin' to do with makin' this country in the first place. They say he made the East, and Californy, and shoveled all the waste stuff out here and forgot about it.

Frost laughed. It made him sound almost tolerable. He turned, and walked on around the springs, keeping to some cut-bank rims.

Night breeze was blowing, carrying the odor of cooking from the Conestoga. There was a candle burning inside, and shadows kept moving across the new, white canvas. One of the shadows belonged to Bearpaugh.

"Wisht I was in there and could horn in on that fancy Chink cookin'," the red-whiskered bullwhacker said, walking up behind Dillon. "That smells a heap better'n the bear-sign and bellywash that that drunken dough-wrangler o' our'n has mulliganed together."

THEY made a long drive next day, finding a trickle of water on Lump Creek, a southern tributary of the Powder. Clouds kept building up to the north and east, but nothing came of them. It was still dry, and the days were hot—unseasonably hot for September. There were fires in the Absoraka, and smoke hung through the day, making the sun seem hotter because of it. Ordinarily the Snaky Buttes would have been visible from there, but fire-haze had blotted them

out. It was a two-day's dry drive straight ahead to the Snakies, and another day through narrow Deserter Canyon to the Sweetwater, but Dillon decided not to make the gamble, and pointed northwest instead.

It was morning. He had ridden a couple of miles in the lead, partly to watch for Injun sign, partly because he liked to be by himself and smell the autumn odors of sage and cured grass.

He paused to roll a cigarette and look back. They'd stopped the drive, and cattle were drifting, cropping the wire-stiff grass. Someone was coming. By her stiff-spined English style of riding he could tell it was Ella Frost while she was still more than a mile distant.

"Father wants to talk to you," she called. "He's waiting back by the Conestoga."

He nodded. He didn't ask what was wrong, he merely rode beside her to the little knoll where the Conestoga had stopped.

Bearpaugh was sitting his big bay horse, talking to Frost, moving his head with decisive jerks. He stopped talking and waited as Dillon rode up.

Frost said, "Bearpaugh thinks were foolish to take the northern route around the Snakies. He says we can make the pass in two days, that we'll find water there on the Crazy Fork, and reach the Sweetwater in another day. The northern route, I understand, will take more than a week."

Dillon nodded. "And if we knew there'd be water in the Crazy Fork, that would be the way to go. But I'd lay gold to greenbacks the Crazy hasn't got spit in its bottom. There's been some fallen beef already. "We'll lose a hell of a lot more if this heat holds on that long dry drive. I'll find plenty of water up north."

He was going to ride off as though that ended the matter, but a glimpse of Frost's obstinate expression stopped him.

"I don't agree with you!" Frost stated.

"What you mean is that Bearpaugh doesn't agree with me."

"I'm able to make up my own mind. And I don't like your tone. I'm half owner, and you'll guide us only so long as I'm convinced you're doing the wise thing. In this instance I think you're taking too much of a gamble by driving north where Crow war parties may be waiting. And there's a rustler town along the Montana line. Halderman. I don't want to chance it."

It wasn't his words so much as the way they were spoken. Dillon knew that Bearpaugh had been naming him a rustler, saying there was a connection between him and that long-rope crew that hung out at that renegade town of Halderman on the Montana line.

Dillon spoke, keeping his voice easy, "What's he been telling you?"

"Who?"

"You know who."

"There doesn't need to be anyone involved in this but the two of us."

"I guess he already called for cards in this hard hand. Ain't that so, Bearpaugh?"

Bearpaugh had slumped to one side in the saddle, bringing the pearl butt of his .44 around. The Bucktooth Kid had walked between the Conestoga and its trail-wagon and stood with shoulders against a wheel, thumbs hooked in the band of his pants.

Lefty rode up, walking his horse, and no one knew he was there until he cleared his throat. The sound, breaking a tight silence, made Bearpaugh jerk and look around. Lefty seemed casual enough, looking from one to another, smiling with his round, pinkish face, and nobody would take him to be very dangerous, but his being there changed the situation.

Frost said, raising his voice edgily, "Dillon, I'm not saying anything against you. You may be all right, and you may

not. I don't know. But I'll not be forced into taking a single risk I don't believe to be necessary."

"Just say what you started out to say."

"I'm asking you to take us by the most direct route."

"You can ask and be damned. We'll tally the herd."

"What?"

"I said we'd tally the herd. We'll split 'em as they come, one for one. I had an understanding with Ken Roos back in McKetrick that whenever Bearpaugh coppered my bets I could take the north trail, and you can drive your cut over the rimrocks of hell and jump after 'em."

Frost cried, "Roos and I are partners. It was understood when his father made the deal with me last winter—"

"*Were* partners!"

Bearpaugh dug his spurs. The bay started forward, and Bearpaugh brought him around, sawing on his mean half-breed bit. He spoke hoarsely to Frost, "I'd check up with Roos to see if he ever said—"

"It's true!" Ella Frost cried. "Ken told me himself."

Frost stood drawn up and stiff with two spots of color showing in his grayish cheeks. He drew a deep, trembly breath, and finally he said,

"All right. Dillon. I promised to let you guide us. Maybe it was a mistake, but I'll stick to it."

Bearpaugh cursed through his teeth and started to remonstrate, but Frost stopped him with sudden fierceness, "I said I'd stick to it!"

The Bucktooth Kid moved aside, letting Frost pass and climb the tail steps inside the Conestoga. . . .

CLOUDS built up again that night, this time grayish rather than purplish black and without the lightening which generally characterize Wyoming's "dry rains." Nights were always cool at that altitude, making a blanket and tarp welcome even in warmest weather, but this night the wind was more than cool—it swept down across the prairie with the feel of Canada in it.

"Looks maybe like we called the wrong turn," Lefty said, walking up from the cavvy and hunkering beside Dillon at the cookfire. "We could make that dry drive good enough with the heat breaking."

"Maybe. Only Bearpaugh seemed too damned anxious."

Some of the boys seemed to be listening, so Lefty waited until grubpile was finished before he asked,

"What did you mean about Bearpaugh bein' too anxious?"

"Why, it shouldn't make a damned never mind to him which way we point this herd. It's no particular trick putting them through to the Sweetwater. I tell you, he's bakin' himself some sour biscuits with that saloonkeeper at McKetrick. Rance What's-His-Name. Bruckner. I'd like to know where he fits in."

"Rustlers?"

"Oh hell!—that's a chippy game, redecoratin' the hides of these twelve-dollar bone-bags from Texas. Say what you like about Bruckner and Bearpaugh, they play for the blue chips."

"Rustlin' three thousand head wouldn't be so small."

"No, but they couldn't get away with it. Not even in Wyoming."

Wind was increasing, making the cookfire blow bright and dim until finally the boys had to throw water on it. There was a taste of rain in the air, so instead of using his tarp as a simple cover, Dillon cut sticks of greasewood from bushes which grew head-high on the sides of a dry wash and fashioned a crude lean-to tent with its face to the south.

He lay on his back, listening to the wind pop the stretched canvas a foot above his head. After a while rain came in repeated gusts, striking like handfulls of

shot. Now and then a few drops would eddy inside the tent feeling cold, like sleet.

Dillon had been asleep. He awoke with an abrupt jerk. A sound or movement somewhere. He listened. There was a thick, rainy darkness, and rain was falling slow and steady, striking the wet canvas above him. Shod hoofs made a brittle click-clack, stirring loose stones at the bottom of the dry wash.

He kicked on his boots, drew his gun and belt from under the Mormon blanket he used as a pad, strapped its heavy weight around his lean waist.

Once outside he found it wasn't really raining much. Stretched canvas makes a single drop sound like ten. He listened some more. The shod hoofs sounded again at considerable distance. Cattle were stirring somewhere off in the dark, but it was nothing unusual.

He drew out his big, silver watch but there was no light to read it. He didn't want to strike a match. He put it back and walked to the rope corral. There were six horses there, held for the night watch.

"Gregg!" he said, and the nighthawk came with a dragging jingle of his spurs. "Was that the second watch turning out?"

"About half an hour ago it was."

"Just now. Somebody was riding down the dry wash."

"I didn't see nobody."

Dillon turned and went back. Wind swept across the high prairie, feeling like winter as it struck his damp cotton shirt. One of those September blizzards probably blowing down from Montana with four or five inches of snow that would vanish before balmy Indian summer.

There was something just in front of his tent. He hesitated a moment before realizing it was a man's prone body.

He walked over, dropped to one knee. It was Frost. Dillon turned him over. His hat was gone, and warm blood made a sticky mass of his gray hair. Someone had clubbed him on the back of the skull. Dillon pulled open his mackinaw. He must have awakened and dressed in a hurry, for beneath the mackinaw he wore a flannel nightgown. No heartbeat. Frost was dead.

Dillon stood up. There were little sounds telling him of a man's approach through the dark. He drew his gun.

He saw someone. A tall man. Remmel—one of the cowboys.

Remmel stopped abruptly when he saw Dillon facing him with the gun in his hand.

"It ain't goin' to do any good to blast me, Dillon. I ain't alone. We got you holed in from four sides."

"Why in hell would I shoot *you*?"

Bearpaugh's voice behind him, "Drop the gun. I got you covered, and it wouldn't do my sleepin' any hurt to blast your spine loose from your tail bone."

Dillon's fingers opened, letting the Colt pistol thud the damp sod by Frost's body. He turned around.

"Maybe he's got a bell gun," Bearpaugh growled. "You better frisk him for it, Remmel."

Remmel felt around. "No, he ain't." He picked up Dillon's cutter and slid it in the band of his pants.

"I'll take it," Bearpaugh said. "How about Frost? Is he dead?"

Dillon said softly, "Yes, you did a better job on him than you did on Ken Roos."

Bearpaugh answered sharply, "You always were good with your tongue. But I dare say ther's ways of fixing that. With a Pike-County necktie, for instance."

The Bucktooth Kid slouched out of the darkness behind the cookwagon. He was swinging his .45 at his side.

"Hangin' be damned," he said in his magpie voice. "A short drop on a stiff rope is too good for club-killers. A bullet through the guts—that's heap-good bushwhack medicine. Let 'em lay a couple suns and think it over."

THE KID jerked the .45 so its muzzle was pointed up, and then hooked the hammer, letting the gun's own weight cock it, but Bearpaugh said something to him in a half-audible voice. All the crew except the two boys riding circle had gathered by then.

"Anybody tell the girl?" the nighthawk asked.

"I'll get her," said Lefty.

The Bucktooth Kid jerked his head at Lefty, "We better get his gun, too."

There was some one moving down the Conestoga's let-down steps. "What's wrong?" the girl asked. "Where's Dad?"

Lefty spoke, "I'm terribly sorry, Miss Ellen."

"What do you mean?"

"He's dead."

She didn't say anything. She ran barefoot across the cold, wet sod with a few inches of her white nightgown showing beneath the blanket she'd draped around her body. She crouched over her father, commenced shaking his shoulder as though that could awaken him.

"My dear!" Bearpaugh said, touching her arm.

She didn't notice. After a while she got hold of herself and stood up. She said,

"He heard someone ride into camp. That's why he left the wagon. I was only half awake. . . ."

Bearpaugh was trying to lead her back to the Conestoga. She seemed then to notice the huge man for the first time.

"Keep your hands off me!"

He stepped back.

She asked, "Well, what do you know about it? What do any of you know about it?"

Bearpaugh said, "We found him there by Dillon's tent. They were quarreling about something, your dad and Dillon. One of the boys heard them and started over—"

"Which one of the boys?"

"Why, the Kid."

"The Bucktooth Kid? It would be!"

"I'm sorry ma'am. Maybe you better go back to the wagon. This is man's business out here."

"I'll not go to the wagon! And as for it being your business and not mine—"

"He was my friend, Miss Ella. I'm only trying to help." He spoke to Remmel, "You better get a tarp. Get one of the boys to help. He shouldn't be left layin' out here in the rain." He noticed the cook standing around, "Get a fire going!"

Ella watched the men roll her father's body in a tarp and lay it beneath the trail-wagon. The cook was trying to kindle a fire with damp shavings.

"Why do you keep him covered with that gun?" Ella cried, pointing to Dillon.

Bearpaugh, "Because we're going to give him a trial."

She laughed with a bitter sound, "And what will you do when you decide he's

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guilty. As you already seem to have?"

Dillon said in a soft voice, "Why, they have it on their minds to hang me."

"A jury!" She looked around at the cowboys who still formed a silent, ill-at-ease circle, "They're all afraid of you," she said to Bearpaugh. "They're all your men, every one of them. They'll do whatever you tell them to."

"Don't forget your father had confidence in me!"

"How could I?"

"You'd better go back to the wagon." She didn't move. "Remmel! Take her back to the wagon. Good Lord, man, hurry up. She'll get the black cough in her lungs out in this wet, barefooted."

Dillon spoke in his easy voice, "You'd better do what he says. Get some boots and a slicker on, anyhow."

Lefty elbowed Remmel out of the way and walked with her to the wagon. He went inside, and after a while smoke commenced rolling heavily from out the stovepipe.

Remmel said, "What we goin' to do about Dillon, here? We ain't got any proof—"

He noticed the Bucktooth Kid and shut up instantly. He'd forgotten the Kid claiming he'd overheard a quarrel between Frost and Dillon.

Remmel said, "Yeah. I'd forgot. Well, I—"

Bearpaugh, "We'll wait till morning." He smiled with a hard twist of his lips. "Maybe when it's daylight we'll be able to sight a cottonwood tree."

The red-whiskered bullwhacker beat his arms, trying to take the wet stiffness from his buckskin shirt. "It's a damn fool idee all around. We know thar won't be no neck-twistin' whenever. What's the hitch with that damned dough-wrangler of our'n. He ought to git coffee to goin'. By the hairy old hell, I'd ruther see blackleg loose in a herd than a poor useless, no-account cook."

CHAPTER THREE

Bait for a Pike-County Necktie

THE BOYS waited around for a half-hour, hoping for coffee, but the cook never did succeed in getting the fire blazing. He ended by flying into a rage and booting the refractory wood in all directions, and the boys drifted off to their half-drowned beds, leaving Remmel and a short cowboy called Porky to stand unwilling guard over Dillon's tent.

Dillon pulled off his boots and crawled once more beneath the blankets. He could hear Porky and Remmel speak a few words occasionally, or the grate of a match as one of them lighted a cigarette. Snow was coming now and then in little, hard pellets that made hissing sounds when they struck the stiff-wet canvas of his lean-to.

He dozed after a while, and woke up again. Bearpaugh's voice. A shadow crossed in front of his tent.

"They'll hang you in the morning, Dillon," he said.

"Want to bet?"

"They're my boys, and they'll do what I tell them. Lefty and Charley. Grace might try to cause trouble, but I guess we can take care of them."

"Why'd you come here then?"

"I don't *want* to hang you."

Dillon laughed, an abrupt, brittle sound. He was sitting up. "You don't?"

"No. The story would get around, and you have too many friends. And there's the girl. She'd never forgive me. I care a great deal for Miss Frost."

"What you going to do? Cut me loose to drift?"

"Yes. There's a horse saddled and waiting on the off side of the chuckwagon. You fork that horse in a hurry and I don't guess there'll be many to follow you."

Dillon drew on his stiff, damp boots. He moved on hands and knees outside the

lean-to, looked around. Just himself and Bearpaugh as far as the dark would let him tell. Bearpaugh had his .44 drawn.

"Where's the Bucktooth?" Dillon asked.

Bearpaugh hesitated. "Asleep, I guess."

"Call him here."

"Why in hell should I do that?"

"Because I'd like to get my bullets in front."

Bearpaugh started to take a step backward. He'd forgotten about the stretch-ropes fastened to the lean-to front. One of them touched his calf, and he had to turn to maintain his balance. The .44 hadn't been leveled, and for that instant it was even farther off-angled. Dillon moved forward. Bearpaugh saw him and tried to bring its long barrel around. He lost his balance completely and sprawled backward. The .44 pounded, sending powderflame that brushed Dillon's shoulder.

Dillon had a knee in the man's belly, hand on his gun wrist ramming it against the wet sod. He rolled, letting the twist of his body wrench the gun free.

He got to his feet, but Bearpaugh wrapped arms around his legs. He drove heel and spur to the man's broad face.

Bearpaugh fell with both arms up to protect his eyes.

Dillon turned. He knew the Bucktooth Kid was somewhere, waiting to ambush him "trying to escape."

Men were rising from their beds, shouting questions, awakened by the shot. There was movement beyond the chuck-wagon. Dillon stood with the .44 ready, sure it was the Kid but not willing to take a chance shot.

Darkness was ripped by flame; a bullet made a fluttering sound overhead. Too dark for anything but a squaw-gun loaded with buck, and that was just as well for Dillon, because the Bucktooth was a good shot.

The .44 rocked in Dillon's hand, aiming at the flash. He thumbed the hammer rapidly twice more. There were six shots in all, so close-spaced a second and a half would have covered them all.

Dillon walked forward through gun-smoke blowing away on the north-east wind. He was cursing the Smith & Wesson. It was longer barreled and its recoil tossed it differently than the Colt.

"What is it?" Ella cried in a high, edgy voice from the rear steps of the wagon. Light from somewhere was caught on one of the octagonal faces of the Winchester she was holding. Dillon wondered if she knew how to shoot it. Anyhow, she was living up to her bronze colored hair.

"Who is it shooting?" she demanded.

One of the punchers answered, "Dillon and the Kid, I guess. The Kid's down."

DILLON moved around the chuck-wagon .44 leveled, hip-high. He could see the Bucktooth Kid down with a couple of the boys bending over him. He'd been hit all right. He was on hands and knees, muttering, pressing an elbow against his right side. He started to get up, and his eyes fastened on Dillon. He cursed through his stuck-out teeth and grabbed for the .45 that lay on the ground between his knees.

Dillon didn't kill him. He drove his right foot, heel first, catching him high on the cheek and spilling him back to the earth. He lay propped on his elbows, a trapped-weasel look in his eyes.

Dillon picked up the gun. It was a short-barrelled Colt, the twin of his own gun. He spun the cylinder. Two loads left.

"Give me his belt."

One of the cowboys unbuckled it for him. He felt better with its cartridge-heavy weight hanging around his hips.

"What the hell, Dillon?" the red-whiskered bullwhacker asked.

"Bearpaugh wanted to turn me loose. Even offered me a horse. Only the Kid

was there, waiting to bushwhack me."

"Why you dirty—" the bullwhacker was moving forward to swing jackboots at the Kid, but Remmel grabbed his arm and swung him around.

"Hold on! Maybe Bearpaugh did, and maybe he didn't." He looked at Dillon. "Well, cowboy, you better take it down the long coulee if you don't want to be fitted for that hangrope."

"Here's my neck if you lads want to test out your luck." He looked around. Most of the faces were hostile, but nobody made a move against him. Not even Bearpaugh who plodded up, holding a white silk handkerchief to the cheek where Dillon's spur rowel had dug.

"How about my gun?" Bearpaugh asked through his teeth.

"Take it."

Dillon threw it to the ground, kicked it with the heel of his boot, deliberately ramming its barrel forward so it filled with gumbo mud.

Bearpaugh said, "That was an Injun trick!"

"I'm full of 'em."

The Bucktooth Kid had taken a slug in the ribs that had glanced and emerged leaving only a flesh wound. A couple of the boys finally got a fire going and boiled sage leaves, binding them tight to his wound on the theory that they would draw out the "powder poison." Afterward the dough-wrangler brewed a pot of Arbuckle's.

Dillon walked with Ella back to the Conestoga, finished his tincup of coffee there, tossed the heel-grounds away.

"There'll be more trouble," she said.

"I suppose."

"Won't you come in?"

He understood how it was. She didn't like to be alone with the cold wind blowing and that tarp-wrapped body under the trail wagon.

Dillon forgot about being tall until it came time for him to get through a door, which wasn't often. A candle was burning in a stick on the let-down table. The girl's bed was still made out with blankets tossed up the way she'd left it. Just beyond was a curtain separating it from the remainder of the wagon.

She took off her slicker. She must have stayed up after hearing about her father, for she was wearing Levis with a coarse riding skirt drawn over them.

"Mind if I smoke?" Dilon asked.

"I wish you would. I like the smell of tobacco around. I used to like it when Dad—" she stopped.

"Go ahead and talk about it. It'll make you feel better."

She tried to smile. He noticed how white her skin looked in contrast to the bronze of her hair. Ken Roos was the same way, with skin that refused to take much of a tan.

"What should we do?" she asked.

"About the cows?"

"Well, about—"

"You'll have to forgive me. Cowboys are mostly the same. Always think of critters first. About your pa—we'll have to bury him right here. Oh, I know how it seems. I was with an emigrant string one time, guiding it over on Tongue River. Woman lost her boy. A fine sixteen-year-old. Took a Cheyenne bullet. We had to bury him there. She wanted to stay. Couldn't bear leavin' him in that awful loneliness. Yes ma'am, we tied her down in the wagon and drove off. But she got over her feelin' about desertin' that boy bye and bye, I reckon. The prairie's lonesome, but it's wild and clean, and you get to feelin' different about it after while. I know some mighty fine men laid out here on the prairie."

"I'm sorry." She bit her lip. "I guess I'm not measuring up too well."

"You measure up plenty good."

She shivered. It was warm inside the wagon, but sometimes lonesomeness gets down inside a person's skin. Even a man

like Dillon got to feeling it now and then.

SHE said, "The cattle—what do you think we should do? You knew there were three men who rode into camp, and sneaked out. I know they weren't seeing you. It was Bearpaugh. Do you have any idea what they were seeing him about?"

"It'll come out in the next couple days. Anyhow, they're gone and Bearpaugh probably told them we were taking the herd by the north trail around the Snakies. Se we'll change our course and go straight west like he suggested in the first place."

"But you said—"

"Yeah, I know. But drivin' them through this wet-cold is a lot different than sunshine. I think we'll make it without losing more'n a few even if we drive hard. All night. We should hit Deserter Canyon tomorrow night or the morning after. No dust cloud to give us away and this rain settled down close, there'll be a good chance we can get through before any of that gang from up north knows what we're about. Anyhow, Bearpaugh will be forced to show his hand."

"Why don't we have it out with Bearpaugh right now?" she cried. "I'm getting tired of—"

"That'd be the brave thing to do, I reckon, but you don't always live by being brave. Sometimes you do best by just drifting along and being smart."

She was standing, looking up at him. There wasn't much room in the wagon. The narrow space between bed and wall seemed to thrust them close together.

"It's strange," she said. "Seems strange to me. A man like you taking a long gamble for a herd of cattle you don't even own." Then she added, "But maybe it's because you want to help me."

Dillon was strongly aware of her closeness, he could smell the fresh sage and prairie fragrance of her hair.

She moved towards him, and he took hold of her shoulders. It was the first time he remembered actually touching her. He'd lived long in that rough land of men, and the frail softness of her flesh surprised him for an instant.

"Dillon!" she whispered. "I've tried not to let myself get scared—"

"Sure, I know."

She had moved hard against him, her rain cold hands closing on the open front of his slicker. Her eyes were blue, and by the yellow candlelight they turned dark as midnight.

With an abrupt movement he held her away.

"I guess this is something you better think over."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Devil Was a Mountain Billy

HE WENT outside. She didn't say anything, but he could sense her eyes all the while till the door closed. Rain and wind felt good to his face. He stood cursing through his teeth—cursing the way she made him feel, cursing Ken Roos for getting himself laid out in McKetrick.

It was getting daylight with a misty softness coming from all over the sky. Strips of snow shone white on the lee sides of wagon wheels and sage clumps, and in some places the grass crunched from silver thaw.

The herd was up, and here and there milling a little. Up ahead, ready to lead, was a rangy Goodnight bull, pawing and bellowing with a high, trumpet sound.

They buried Frost without removing him from the tarp. Lefty said a prayer, and the herd got under way.

Dillon and Charley Grace stayed at the point where little by little the herd was swung to a course directly west. Heavy, low-hanging clouds kept the Snakies invisible. Bearpaugh gave no sign of noticing that the route had been altered. He spent the day riding scout position a half-

mile to the north, coming in only at brief intervals to drive in a stray or help on a coulee crossing.

Night came early, but Dillon kept on moving. After three hours of darkness without pause, the Mex bullcook rode up on one of the cook's string and asked,

"Thees men, they all want know when he have grubpile, señor."

"Tell 'em tonight we'll have Spanish supper. One notch in their bellybands. Grubpile tomorrow morning."

"I tell them *thees?* They would peestol-shoot me, señor."

"Then let the cook tell 'em." Dillon's teeth were briefly visible through the dark. "Gun slugs bounce right off'n cooks."

Just before dawn the mile-wide valley of the Crazy Fork opened darkly beyond abrupt cutbanks. Buffalo trails took zig-zag courses down through rose thorn and sage. They'd need daylight to lower the wagons.

"Grubpile!" Dillon shouted, riding along the drawn-in herd. "Grubpile, you ranahans."

He dismounted by the chuckwagon and hobbled around, kicking the cramps of long riding from his knees.

Bearpaugh followed him in, dismounted and strode over, pausing five or six steps away with his stud-horse legs spread, his face looking heavy and lopsided from the spur cut Dillon had stomped there.

"That's the Crazy Fork!" Bearpaugh said.

"You know the country good, Bearpaugh."

"Then you've decided to take the route through Deserter!"

"That ought to make you happy. You wanted to come this way—remember?"

The brutality that ran deeply through Bearpaugh's nature showed in his face. He was about to say something, decided different. He turned and started over toward the remuda.

"Where you going?" Dillon asked.

Bearpaugh turned. His right hand opened and closed as though it itched for a gun, but his slicker was latched shut, and the .44 was under it.

"I don't think it's any of your damned business."

Dillon raised his voice, "Where were you going?"

"Below. To look for water."

"You'll stay here."

Dillon's slicker was unfastened, and a swing of his shoulders brought the front of it open, revealing the butt of his .45.

"All right." Bearpaugh was keeping tight control of his voice. "All right, Dillon. Just as you say."

Crazy Fork Coulee was a mile wide with steep sides and a level bottom through which a creek meandered. As Dillon had predicted, the creek had long been dry.

The cattle were driven down in bunches along the old buffalo trails. Afterward it was necessary to lower the wagons with lariat ropes strung to anchor teams above.

Dillon had been too busy to think of Bearpaugh, but once they were strung out along the Crazy Fork he looked around.

"He vamoosed," Lefty said, riding up on his gotch-eared circle pony. "Headed north along the rimrocks floggin' the Billy-b-jeez out of that bay long-horse of his."

"How about the Kid?"

"Haven't seen him."

The old lead bull was bellowing and pawing in a wet bank of the creek without finding enough water to wet his tongue. It wasn't easy to get those lean Texas dogies strung out and moving.

Shortly before noon they struck the deep, old ruts of the emigrant trail, and a mile farther Deserter Canyon forked straight into the Snaky Buttes.

THEY were low mountains, the Snakies, grass covered, their tops knobbed with basalt and scrub pine.

After hours of heavy driving into steeper country, Dillon rode back, ordering the cook to pause and make a cold camp. There was little difficulty holding cattle in the narrow V of the valley long enough for the boys to eat their cold beans and dummy.

Lefty returned after making a wide circle of the hills ahead.

"Nothing?" Dillon asked.

Lefty shook his head. "That cross-canyon up ahead would make one hell of a bushwhack spot, but I didn't run across man-sign no place."

"You mean Colter Creek? We better keep watch of it. No telling how far Bearpaugh had to go. He might pick up that short-trigger band of his and head back."

Dillon paused a moment beside Charley Grace who was at one of the swing spots. The cattle had been driven hard, but there were only a few fallen ones. Six or seven. There'd have been six or seven hundred of them down in that distance if it had stayed hot.

"Keep 'em moving—hard. Let the slow ones be damned. I told Shorty and that Gannon kid to make up a drag herd and get 'em on the best they could."

"Think Bearpaugh'll try something yonder?"

Dillon's narrow, gray eyes swept the mountain country. "Maybe. I don't know any more about it than you do."

He rode ahead until the herd was miles behind him and only the steady bawl of them came to his ears. The emigrant trail commenced climbing from the canyon bottom where big, blocky masses of slide rock made travel difficult. Wagon trains had not traveled it since the Wagonhammer massacre twelve years before, and grass and buckbrush had taken root. Sometimes, looking down from horseback, the road was hard to discern, but when a man's eyes roved farther its winding course could be seen, climbing slowly along the contours of the mountainside.

A mule deer which broke brush and started off at a series of stiff-legged hops was the only living thing aside from chipmunks and birds.

The emigrant road made a swing up Colter Creek and returned to follow a strip of benchland separating the mountain from the sharp descent to Deserter Canyon.

Dillon did not follow the road but went steeply downhill to Colter Creek and up the other side, crashing thickets of thornapple. He dismounted while still hidden and sat on his heels, letting his eyes sweep the country.

His pony cropped grass for a while, then tossed his head with a jingle of bridle links.

"Easy boy!" Some men have voices that will quiet a horse. Dillon stood up, hand resting on the animal's neck. Two or three minutes passed. Hoofs stirred loose pebbles on the slope below. Lefty was riding, trailing him.

Breeze struck down from the northeast and it had been something in that direction which had alarmed the horse, not Lefty.

"Almost rode you down," Lefty said, pulling up suddenly.

"Keep on going. Right over the shoulder and up the bench. I have an idea somebody will show themselves. Wait yonder."

Lefty ambled on, body swinging easily with the movements of his horse. He covered a half mile of the bench and dropped from sight among rocks and dwarf timber.

Dillon stayed where he was, rolling a cigarette, smoking it dry. He caught movement on the edge of mountain timber. A horse and rider easing down the slope. Another followed, another, until eight had appeared. They were better than a half-mile away, but by their manners of riding he recognized Bearpaugh and the Bucktooth Kid among them.

After they were up-canyon and out of sight, Dillon spat out the sodden remains of his cigarette and led his horse back down the slope of Colter Creek, and thence rode back along the crooked bottom of Deserter.

"I'm up here!" Lefty said.

"I know. I could smell your cigarette."

"Why not? They all saw me."

Lefty was sitting on his bootheels, hidden by thorn-apple brush, looking down the dirt and rock side of the canyon. Farther on, the canyon became sheer rock, but here Dillon was able to climb it. He tried to lead the horse, but it was too steep. After a couple of tries Dillon uncased his carbine and went up without him.

"Now what?" Lefty asked.

"Wish I knew. They must be figuring on circling back on the other side to raid and drive a cut of the cows up Colter Creek."

LEFTY looked thoughtful through the smoke of his cigarette. "Say! that might work!"

"Not for dead men it won't."

"You think it's come to that?"

"Pretty sudden it will. You ride up the old emigrant trail yonder. Act like you didn't suspect anything. Put the Winchester away, it might give 'em ideas. There's some rocks big enough to hide a horse. Get off there, and belly crawl back toward the canyon. Then wait. If they try coming back along the other side to cut the herd, start blastin' their lights out."

He watched Lefty ride through spotty brush and on along the bench. The bench narrowed as it went along, and the canyon wall more sheer.

A gun pounded, raising a rattle of echoes from rock surfaces.

He looked for Lefty, but he wasn't in sight.

Dillon moved forward, thumb hooked over the gun hammer. Lefty's gotch-eared horse galloped into sight from among the rocks, head tilted to one side to prevent his stepping on bridle reins.

Dillon kept down, fighting down the sick feeling that rose through his guts at the thought of his sending Lefty into a deadfall.

The horse, still frightened, galloped almost to the sheer drop of the canyon, turned, and ran back down the bench, past the spot where Dillon waited, and finally disappeared over the brink of Colter Creek.

The sound of hoofs died away. No other shots. A tinkle of birdsong somewhere, the whisper of wind through autumn-stiff grass. And coming closer, the steady bawl of cattle.

He moved along toward the spot where he'd last seen Lefty. He'd have to cross the bench. There was a narrow spot where boulders had been heaped on each side of the road.

He was on hands and knees with the Winchester on the ground, getting ready to sprint across.

A bullet dug dirt from under the tips of his fingers and screamed off, clattering rocks along the canyon's far wall. The sharp *whang!* of explosion came an instant later.

He fell face down, getting protection from a little heap of rocks. A second bullet hammered in, driving rock fragments. The bullets were coming from somewhere along the mountainside.

He cursed, realizing they had been watching him all the time, and had waited until the moment they could kill him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Trail's End

HE INCHED back, bellying flat, dragging the Winchester after him. No chance of using it. A man can't aim a rifle

when he's stretched out long as a bullsnake.

Half a minute. Cattle were bellowing closer from down the canyon.

He had time to think. His guess was wrong, of course. About the ambush at Colter. Nothing like that on their minds. They had another plan.

He kept inching back. A rifle whanged again. More rock splinters whirred, burning as one of them struck his cheek. Gray powdersmoke puffed among juniper a hundred yards up the mountain. The other shots had originated up there somewhere, but not the same gun. There had been the sharp ring of a .30-.30, the deeper bellowing sounds of a .44 Winchester.

Only one reason for them being there, above the narrow bench with the canyon's precipitous drop on the other side. They intended to catch the herd and drive them over like Indians killing buffalo.

Dillon knew then that their real quarry was not this herd of trail-skinny Texas cattle, but the Sweetwater range, a twenty-mile strip of the finest grassland in the northwest. That's why rawboned Rance Bruckner was involved. It would take him a couple weeks to bring his herd around from the Belle Fourche and grab it by legitimate occupation.

He watched for what seemed like a long time, and at last the old lead bull showed his back above the rise from Colter Creek a mile away.

Bearpaugh wouldn't start the cattle running yet. The canyon was steep but it didn't have the steep drop needed to make a kill. Bearpaugh would wait until most of the herd was three-fourths of a mile farther along.

Dillon kept bellying backward, rocking from elbow to elbow, Winchester in both hands. He was in the open, but his clothes, blending with rain-drab rocks and grass made him hard to distinguish.

A gun pounded. That .44 Winchester again. Long range for it. The heavy slug furrowed earth a dozen steps away. He saw the puff of smoke, movement of a dark form beneath it.

He was on his stomach, head up. He jerked the Winchester back, set the stock, squeezed the trigger.

A man sprang to his feet and stumbled into full view with rifle dangling loose in his fingers. His knees collapsed and he rolled face foremost down the slope.

Dillon was already diving to the protection of a boulder at the brink of the canyon. He lay still. A gun commenced hammering with insistent, spiteful regularity. No sign of bullets.

The canyon sloped off behind him. A dozen feet of slope, then the abrupt drop. Fifty or sixty feet, but here and there were crevices where sage had taken root. With luck he could clamber safely to the bottom and double back, either in time to stop the herd or turn it into the canyon bottom be-

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WILDROOT CREAM-OIL HAIR-TONIC

fore steep walls made such a thing impossible.

He couldn't climb with the .30-.30. He let it slide, stock first. It struck a ledge and bounded, striking barrel down in brushy thorns far below.

"Hell on sights," Dillon said through his teeth.

He moved down, feeling with his boots. There was a crevice, then the gnarled trunk of a sagebrush. He slid on, holding the sagebrush, found rough stone for his boot. It was soft, shaly rock—crumbled. He twisted over with a panther-quick movement, and slid on spurs and elbows, catching himself on a ledge fifteen feet below.

A stream of rocks the size of a man's fist rolled around him. Above, those guns were still hammering, harder than ever. Then he heard another sound—the rising thunder of hoofs.

He knew what had happened. Lefty hadn't been killed. He'd sneaked around to the mountain with his .30-.30 and turned those cattle along the bottom of Deserter Canyon.

He looked down. Nothing but sheer wall and the flat, dry bottom of the creek. In a minute, two minutes at the most, that bottom would be packed from one side to the other with a running, terrified herd. His eyes swung above, at the gnarled sagebrush silhouetted against grayish sky.

It gave a man an empty feeling down in his intestines to be cornered that way.

Rifles were still pounding, their sharp concussions considerably closer. Bearpaugh's men had seen the stampede and were crawling across the emigrant trail to fire down on the animals and do what damage they still could. It would be only a matter of seconds before they located Dillon on the ledge.

He drew his Colt. There was an empty chamber under the hammer. He removed a cartridge from his belt and loaded it.

He caught movement, or the shadow of movement up above. He flattened himself instinctively as a gun exploded. The bullet fluttered the air close and dug pebbles from the creek bed far below.

A foot had started loose dirt and rocks that ran in a thin stream to his right. He knew by that there was someone coming down.

HE SLID the Colt back in its holster and took a notch in his heavy-sagging cartridge belt. He found a toe and handhold, climbed, reached overhead for the sagebrush, pulled his weight up. He got the gnarled sage trunk under his left arm and held himself that way, and drew the Colt.

He waited. A sweat-stained hat moved into view. The man still thought he was on the ledge. Beneath the hat was a long, loose-mouthed face covered with a half-inch of red whisker. One of that rustler crowd Dillon had once seen around Halderman.

The man glimpsed him and tried to twist his body around. It was a bad angle for his gun. Dillon pushed himself back with his left hand, aimed the Colt between his body and the canyon wall. He fired with the powder burning across the front of his shirt.

Short range. Scarcely forty feet. The red-whiskered one's gun went off still angled toward the sky. Dillon could hear his sucking breath. He fell, turned face down scraping the wall, struck a projecting rock and spun over before striking the jagged slide-rock below.

Dillon didn't look down at the man's broken form. He still hung with the sagebrush beneath his arm, waiting for another to show himself.

He could hear the vibration of hoofs, the herd was so close now. They'd show in a few second.

Bearpaugh's voice above—"Where's the dirty son? I'll give him a gutful of his own damned beef."

He was insane with anger that his plan had misfired, that the stampede had been forced too soon.

Dirt showered in Dillon's face. He clung tight, gun angled up, waiting.

Bearpaugh's voice, "You hear that, you yella-belly? Come up here, you're my meat. Or do I shoot you down like a buzzard off a tree branch?"

"I'm here if you want me. And bring your short-trigger boys along. You'll need 'em."

"I don't need help to make a carcass of you, Dillon. I'd have done it three sleeps ago if you hadn't hid behind a woman."

The sole of one pointed boot appeared, digging for support. He was heavy for the rock and it kept crumbling. Suddenly Bearpaugh realized how close Dillon was, that he was no longer on the ledge, but waiting, just beneath him.

He twisted around. Big, but quick as a bobcat. He angled the .44. Two guns exploded at the same instant, but there was a slight curve to the wall there near its top, and the bulge of rock made both bullets spatter off, casting fragments of rock and lead that burned like hot coals.

In twisting, Bearpaugh had lost his grasp. For a second he was there, digging fingers into nothing. He fell, feet first. Dillon scarcely realized what had happened. The man's weight struck him, tearing the sagebrush from under his arm. They fell toward the surging, brown mass of cattle below.

The ledge stopped them. It was about four feet wide, covered with grass and sage stalks carried by nesting eagles.

They struck it near the edge and would have rolled on, but Dillon grabbed rough stone and dragged himself in. The movement saved Bearpaugh who was sprawled over him.

Bearpaugh rolled to his feet. His shoulders were braced against the wall. Dillon was coming to hands and knees. Bearpaugh drove his right foot. The heavy boot and spur smashed against the side of Dillon's head, driving him over. He was balanced at the edge. Bearpaugh swung his boot again.

He grunted from the effort. The sound rose in his thick throat to become a laugh of triumph. Effort and fear had twisted his face, making it livid. Spittle ran from the corners of his mouth.

"Die, damn you!" He grunted and drove his boot once more. Dillon was over the edge, clinging with forearm and one hand. Bearpaugh kicked again, and Dillon's forearm slipped, leaving him with fingers clawing the edge and body dangling above the brink of nowhere.

He pawed with his toes, but the stone was wind-blown, polished. The edge was not sharp, but sloping. His fingers kept slipping a fraction of an inch at a time as Bearpaugh, shoulders still braced, drove his right leg out, trying to reach Dillon's head.

Too far. Bearpaugh came forward, lifted his heel, drove it down to crush the fingers of Dillon's left hand.

Dillon let go with his other hand. He grabbed Bearpaugh's descending foot. With a snap of lean, trail-hardened muscles, he drew himself over the edge.

Bearpaugh's curse rose to a scream. He staggered, shoulders ramming the wall, tried to rip his foot loose, Dillon came to a crouch, still holding the foot. He rose to full height, lifting the foot above his head.

Bearpaugh struck the ledge on his neck and shoulders. He twisted as he fell, freeing his foot. His shoulders were on rock, legs doubled with knees under his chin.

Dillon knew what was coming. No room to back away. He twisted, bringing his side around as the feet uncoiled. The blow shook him. Bearpaugh was rising, hand coming up clutching a bowie.

He rolled the knife in his hand so its blade was up. He swung it in an arc for Dillon's groin.

But Dillon was ready. His left hand darted, closing on Bearpaugh's wrist. A twist drove the knife point to the rock wall. For an instant it pinned Bearpaugh with one arm drawn across the other. Dillon shifted back a trifle, his right fist swung. The smash landed squarely on the point of Bearpaugh's jaw.

Bearpaugh let go the knife. He staggered with head rocked back. For a terrified instant he was on the edge, arms flung, head and back bent in a desperate struggle for equilibrium.

He fell, his scream diminishing, blanketed by the roar of stampeding cattle.

Dillon rested against the wall an instant. He looked down. No sign of Bearpaugh —only the solid, moving stream of cattle.

He'd seen men before who had fallen beneath a stampede—bodies trampled until nothing but the nose of a timber wolf would distinguish them as men.

There was still shooting. Dillon found his Colt jammed in a rock crevice. He holstered it, climbed, taking his time. The sagebrush was bent down, but the tough roots still gave a handhold. He pulled himself up, found a place for his foot, bellied over the sloping edge.

Guns were close. Rainy north-east wind carried powdersmoke to his face.

He moved on. Two men were crouched behind a boulder, backs to him, firing down the bench. A third man was belly down farther on, and beside him a dead man looking at the sky. All of them from that renegade outfit at Halderman.

From the mountainside someone was dropping bullets close enough to make it tough, and there were more rifles down the emigrant road.

Dillon drew, cocked the gun. Its click made the two closest men spin around. Dillon didn't say anything, merely kept the Colt level.

"Drop 'em!" he said.

They seemed glad of the chance to toss their Winchesters aside. Uphill, Lefty's voice came down. Shouting words that Dillon didn't catch. It was Lefty who'd been dropping those .30-.30 slugs.

Two men bobbed up a hundred yards away, dodged from rock to rock, disappeared in timber up-canyon. Dillon didn't fire. Horses galloped, shod hoofs ringing above the rumble of cattle.

No shooting now. Two men walked from the timber. It was Lefty marching the Bucktooth Kid at the point of a Winchester.

"Don't shoot!" the Kid was whimpering. "I got a slug in the side already. I ain't causin' no trouble."

"Where's Rance Bruckner?" Dillon asked.

"Up in Halderman. He was figurin' to drive them cows of his over from the Belle Fourche, but he had to keep you from reachin' the Sweetwater first. He told these Halderman rustlers they could drive off all the dogies they could cut for helpin' him. Just so none of 'em got to Sweetwater is all him and Bearpaugh cared. I'll testify. I'll tell everything I know—"

"You crawlin' pup!" Lefty said, lowering his rifle and driving the side of his fist to the Kid's neck. It wasn't much of a blow, but the Kid fell anyway, cringing on the ground. "You see how bushwhackers act when they're out of the bushes?"

STORM clouds were breaking away, letting the sun emerge warm and yellow, its long rays reaching across yellow grass that waved belly-deep across a three mile wide valley. Nearby, cottonwood trees wound in an autumn-orange line, marking the bed of a marshy stream.

"Sweetwater," said Dillon, hooking one leg over the saddlehorn. "Sweetwater grass. It's hell, ain't it?—a million years like that, and now you're tamin' it. For what? To fatten up some bone-bag cattle and sell 'em for money. For dirty green muck-a-muck."

(Continued on page 126)

TWO-BIT KING OF HELL'S HALF-ACRE

By JOHN JO CARPENTER

Brace felt the hot breath of the slugs from the little killer's guns.

He was too little to fight the big spreads, but too big to turn tail and run, so Brace Shelton, two-bit cattleman, caught in the deadly whipsaw of a backshoot range-war, told both sides to go to hell—and aimed to blaze their trail himself to that Range of the Damned!

SLEET, rattling down with the impact of birdshot, burnt his already sensitive face when Brace Shelton opened the door of the little cabin high up on Deer Track slope. The evil weather was a surprise, but a pleasant one. He slammed the door quickly, grinning to himself, and walked across the cabin to search out his mittens and a heavier coat.

The cabin had once been a line-camp in a much more extensive spread than Brace ever expected to own. For years it had been part of Hy Mackelly's Circle Star outfit, until Hy fell out with Dug Wearne, across Deer Track. Dug claimed it for a while, as he and Hy fought back and forth for the Deer Track range. And then the place became empty, and Deer Track's rich, rolling shoulders of grass became a sort of No Man's Land between the two warring factions.

No one had told Brace this when, a stranger to Montana, he preempted the little cabin and filed a range-claim. The place was legally anybody's, he was told. He moved in his little herd of breeding heifers, and then, when it was too late, they told him he had squatted in the hottest battleground of the state's bitterest range war.

"This will last a week," he said, preparing to go out into the blizzard. "For that long, no surly Circle Star riders lurking around, suspecting me of being Dug Wearne's spy. No more of Dug's Flying W bullies hiding here to bushwhack Mackelly men. It may be a storm to some people, but it's good weather to me."

His life had been lived in a perpetual state of nervous tension lately—and the tension had become almost fear as the two huge, wealthy outfits again gathered strength for open war. Both Hy and Dug had been hiring men this fall, and it was open gossip that this time they would fight it out to a finish for the Deer Track grass. Each suspected Brace of being in the employ of the other. Neither, he knew, would honor his legal claim to remain here. It had gone too far for that.

So he would have peace for a week, and a welcome peace it was. He had slept little lately, and that lightly. He could rest for a while, because surely no man would venture out in weather like this. Hy's place lay eight miles below him, to the east, in a fertile valley a thousand feet lower. Dug's lay just across the Deer Track hogback, only five miles away, but reached from here by a tortuous canyon trail.

Light-hearted though he was, nevertheless he laced a .45 around him, under his sheepskin coat, before stepping out into the storm. This had become habit with him in the eight months he had been here. Bowing his head against the fury of the driving sleet, walking blindly because he could not see three feet ahead of him, he plowed through drifts toward the little pole-and-brush barn where his horses were sheltered.

Halfway there he stumbled over something that felt like a log, until he remembered there was no log here. His gaiety vanished, and with chattering teeth he knelt and brushed the snow back from the obstruction and peered at it closely.

"A dead man! One of Dug's new ones! The Californian!"

THE dead man was short, but he had been grotesquely powerful. As Brace tried to turn him over, part of his leather jacket tore loose and remained frozen to the ground. He had been shot through the side, low-down and far from the heart. But it was a big wound, and he had fallen on his face here less than twenty yards from Brace's cabin. Freezing weather and loss of blood had raced to see which could claim him.

The Californian, Brace remembered, went by the name of Al Laclede. An ugly-natured, silent man, he was unhandy with cattle and obviously had not been hired for the skills a cattleman ordinarily sought. Both sides had been picking up men like this—all of them that they could get.

"Shot from in front in a mix-up down below me a ways, with one of the Circle Star boys," Brace surmised. "Had to run for it; probably they lost him in the storm. That would make it about midnight. Fell off his horse not far from here when he

got light-headed from bleeding, and *almost* made it. Another twenty yards and he might have lived."

All of his optimism was gone. He would never be able to explain it satisfactorily to Dug. Dug would see only that one of his men had died on Brace's place, and that would be enough to clinch Brace as a secret Mackelly man. As for Hy, he would ask why the dead Laclede ran for help and shelter at Brace's place, if he wasn't one of Dug's allies?

He shouldered the body and carried it down to the stable, where he laid it out as respectfully as he could in an empty feed-bin. He covered Laclede with a horse blanket and went out, barring the door behind him. He stood there a moment, peering into the storm, listening to it howl and scream threats, unfeelingly taking its bite and slash on his face. It did not seem to be a friendly storm now. He returned to the house, and ate a tasteless breakfast.

By noon the storm had eased a little. Ordinarily he would not have stepped any farther from the door than his woodpile, but the dead man down there in the barn had become an intolerable companion. Looking out of his back window, now and then he could make out the gentle round dome that was the mountain top, and the scar to the right that was Wearne Canyon.

"I believe I can make it. I'll *have* to make it. Be a lot better to go tell them than have them come here and find it out."

He saddled his best horse and turned it eastward, after a fill of more rolled barley than he could honestly afford. The indignant animal rebelled, resenting being taken from the cozy barn. It was a smoke-roan stallion, four years old, and both Hy Mackelly and Dug Wearne had offered to buy it.

His refusal to sell the horse had kindled deeper suspicions in both men, but Shady represented another of the dreams that now seemed in danger of exploding. The horse could have become the foundation of a great line of horses, just as the old line-camp eventually could have turned into a fine, prosperous set of ranch buildings.

Grimly, he fought down Shady's wildness and drove the horse up the slope. There was no use keeping to the trail, because there was none. Soon the animal settled down to the job, working upwards in a way that stirred Brace's admiration. All he had to do was keep the canyon gap straight ahead, whenever it showed in a break in the storm. The horse did the rest.

An hour after he left the house the storm suddenly grew worse. Again he was tempted to give it up and turn back to his own stove, his own warm bunk. Half surrendering to this impulse, he pulled the horse up to a stop.

Then he remembered Dug Wearne's square, belligerent face, his thick lips pursed in an eternal pompous snarl, his small, suspicious eyes.

"No use putting it off. The canyon can't be far ahead. There ought to be more shelter there."

There was little in the way of trees or other shelter on these low, barren, Montana mountains. There were no landmarks worth anything in such a storm as this. He had long since lost track of where he was or how far he had come. The minutes dragged along painfully, endlessly, measured only by the number of drifts the determined horse plowed through.

It was well along toward evening when it seemed that the wind had suddenly slackened, and that Shady was pushing ahead wearily but with less effort. Brace had been riding with his face down, his head tucked into the upturned sheepskin collar. He lifted his face now, and through frost-rimmed eyes beheld the welcome shelter of the canyon walls on both sides of him.

Here the snow drifted down almost peacefully, but overhead the wind still howled, carrying the blizzard as violently

as before. But the comparitive peace and the quiet of the canyon brought a feeling of thanksgiving to his heart. He recognized a big, flat, tilted rock.

"Less than two miles to—"

SOMETHING twitched at the flying end of his wool scarf, tugging it sharply, turning his head painfully. Shady jumped and snorted. He grabbed leather shamelessly and fought to hold on. His teeth began chattering as the pitching horse hurried the blood through his cold body.

Then, belatedly, came the crash of a gun, and even before he had the horse under control again he recognized it as a .45. He pulled the horse backward, seeking the shelter of the rock, searching the white canyon floor ahead of him with eyes that smarted from snow-glare.

The gun cracked again, and the nearness of the bullet galvanized him into action. He forgot he was cold and stiff. He threw himself from the saddle. He hit the ground on his side and kept on rolling. Snow covered him, sifting through his clothes to his bare skin, and its touch was like fire. He came up on his hands and knees, gathered his feet under him, and launched himself through the air toward the rock.

His legs worked better than he expected. He hit the rock hard, and another .45 slug splashed against it, but so high up that he knew he was now out of range or out of sight. The last thing he saw before he went into cover was a pair of horses, tied in the edge of a brush-patch a quarter of a mile up the canyon. His own horse had vanished the other way, but undoubtedly it would see them. Shady was not a head-for-home vagrant. He would stay close to Brace—unless there were other horses in the vicinity.

"Two men," Brace said. He was oddly calm; nothing could happen that he had not already anticipated in the last few months. In a way, it was a relief that it had come at last. It hurt to think of losing the place that he had started to build, but he put the thought resolutely from his mind. "Two men. Deal with them first. Then, whatever has to come—well, let it come."

He got his gun out and laid it in his lap. He pulled off his mitten and warmed his hand by putting it into his shirt, against the bare skin of his chest. For some reason, he felt he could afford to wait. They were hunting *him*, not he them. Night was not far away. Shady got lonely when dark fell. He answered Brace's whistle promptly then. Brace had no fear but what he could return home or push on to the Flying W as he chose, after dark.

He lighted his pipe and revelled in the hot, tasty smoke, and grinned to himself when two more .45 slugs spanged against the rock, four feet over his head. Behind him lay the sheer wall of the canyon. They had to come after him from in front.

The pipe was almost finished when he heard a voice call him.

"Hey, nester!"

The term angered him. He had scant respect for plow pilgrims, and regarded himself as a cattleman. Smaller than Mackelly or Wearne, maybe, but cut from the same pattern. He smoked on.

"Hey, nester! Hey, you!" He waited, and in a moment the voice tried it again: "Come out with your hands up and nothing will happen to you. I see the smoke from your cigaret. In just three minutes I'm coming after you."

He finished the pipe, knocking the ashes out quietly just as the three minutes ended. A form suddenly appeared on the other side of the canyon. He hunched lower in the snow, cuddling the hot bowl of the pipe in his hand, taking its warmth gladly into his trigger-muscles.

It was a little, thin, crouched man, bow-legged and showing evidence of many

years in the saddle. Brace knew at once that the other was more snow-blind than himself. He ran with a sidling, hop-skip-and-jump gait, facing Brace and edging down toward the mouth of the canyon. His coat was open, showing two empty holsters. Brace felt a little start of chilling awe at the sight of the two black guns in the man's hands.

He stood up suddenly, pocketing the pipe and grasping his own gun. He dropped it to his side and planted a slug in the skirt of the man's flying coat, at the same time, pressing himself back flat against the rock.

The answer was instantaneous. Snow-blind he might be, but the other could make out the flash of a gun, and his two converged on it, squirting accurate streams of flame and lead. The two slugs came so close to Brace that he could feel their hot breath.

The man came toward him, chanting, "Spot you now, nester. Got you placed. You had your chance to come out and you wouldn't take it." Brace dropped the gun in the capacious pocket of his coat and stepped out softly. The man must have made out his moving shape, for he stopped spraddle-legged and fired again, shooting with the cold, thoughtless confidence of a man who knows he is the master of any man he may meet with a gun.

Brace had the brown rock behind him now, and he took three long, easy steps toward the mouth of the canyon. He stepped away from it at the edge of the rock and began moving toward the two-gun man softly. The man heard him and shot again, but he shot three feet wide of Brace, pounding away at the spot he had just vacated. When he was eight feet away, Brace stopped trying to move up quietly.

He churned through knee-deep snow as hard as he could run, and as the two guns came around he hit the ground and slid in and caught the man around both knees with his right arm. His left went up, driving through the flaps of the open coat. He found the pit of a hard, flat stomach with his doubled fist, heard the man gasp, saw the two guns sag in limp, nerveless hands.

"NOW who's a nester?" he yelled, forgetting for the moment that there was another man somewhere.

He saw Shady run past him, blaring at the two horses up-canyon. It was easy to handle the smaller man now. He kicked the two fine black guns out of reach and caught the other by the shoulder and drove his right against the chin. It was a small, pinched face, the face of a man nearing fifty—but a man who has not aged honorably or peacefully. Small, cold, pale blue eyes, set too close together over a hooked nose. A crooked mouth with brown teeth that were too prominent, and almost no chin. The man went limp all over, and Brace tucked him under one arm.

With his other hand he scooped up the two guns and raced for the shelter of the rock, wondering why there was no gunfire to chase him there. He hit the little pocket where he had hidden before, dropped the gunman, and threw himself down panting. Still there was no attack. He pulled out his pipe, stoked it, lighted it again. The little man slept peacefully.

Then it dawned on him why there had been no other gunfire. There was no second man! He understood why there were two horses. One of them belonged to Al Laclede, who lay dead down in his barn. He slapped the little man, and when it did not revive him, he picked him up and stepped out boldly into the open.

As he had expected, the man had camped beside a fire. There was not much left of it; he had stamped most of it out at Brace's approach. But there was plenty of fuel for the night. Brace stoked the fire and dumped the little man down beside it. He stood looking at the still, cramped bundle a moment, without pity.

In a moment the man stirred. Brace left him and headed for the horses. He caught Shady easily, untied the other two, and led them down to the fire. The little gunman was sitting up now. His eyes showed little, fine flashes of fear, but no panic. The man had lived like a wild animal all his life, and had learned all the lessons of survival. Docile now, but by no means tamed, he squinted up expressionlessly.

"Where's Laclede?" he said, in a flat, half-whispering voice.

"I'll ask the questions." Brace lifted his sheepskin to show the other's two guns, firmly planted in his belt. "Where were you two headed for yesterday, and what happened? Talk up." The other only blinked at him and hugged the fire closer. Without his guns he was like a rattlesnake with its fangs pulled. Brace got down from the horse and stepped close to him. "Talk up, I said! We'll start with your name. What do you go by around here?"

For answer the other man came at him, hitting low down as Brace had hit, striking up with his fists as Brace had struck him. Brace kicked him away easily, although the stallion reared and showed alarm. With one hand he reached down and yanked the little man to his feet. He let go and drove his fist into the gunman's nose, feeling bone and cartilage crunch. The little man upended by the fire and lay there a minute, gagging and whimpering. But when he turned around the same snake-like hatred glittered in his eyes. There was no more sign of fear than before—but there was respect. Animal-like, he had tried his luck. He had failed, and like an animal would await another chance.

"Now talk!"

"Go ahead and kick me," came the muffled reply, as the little man reeled to a sitting position, holding his bleeding, smashed nose. "Sure, you're a fightin' fool! Twenty years younger, forty pounds heavier, and you've got my guns. All right, ranny. You call the turn now, but Dug ain't gonna like it."

Wearily, Brace swung up in the saddle. He kept one horse, the best one. He handed the reins of the other down to the beaten man, who took them silently.

"Now, stamp out that fire." The little man obeyed. When it was lost in the snow, smokeless and cold, he looked up for further orders, his eyes still glittering with malevolent patience. Brace told him, "I'm leaving you your horse. You'd better head for the Flying W pretty fast, my friend. Tell Dug Wearne that his man Laclede is lying dead in my barn. The details, I'll give him when he comes down. Take my advice and tell him the straight of what happened here this afternoon. I'll take Laclede's horse and your guns down to my place. Dug can have them any time he comes after them."

He spun Shady and put him to a trot. The Flying W horse, a mare, followed unwillingly, knowing that home lay in the other direction. At the mouth of the canyon, Brace looked back. The little gunman had mounted and was riding hard in the other direction, tilting and swaying in the saddle but doing his best to get home before night and the storm made it impossible.

Brace found his own way home surprisingly easy. Shady was anxious, and the wind helped this time, instead of hindering. Alone again, however, Brace regretted the afternoon's work. Everything had gone wrong again. Now, when it was too late, he could think of many things he should have done differently. For one, he certainly should have escorted the little gunman over to the Flying W at gunpoint. He should have seen Dug Wearne face to face.

It was good to be home again. It was good to cuddle up to his own cherry-red stove, with a mug of his own coffee in his hand and a bowl of his own hot beans in his lap. But the dead man in the barn

was on his mind continually. The Flying W mare had shied away from the death-smell, refusing to enter the barn with the cold remains of the man who had ridden her less than twenty-four hours ago. . . .

THE storm eased a little during the night, but when he arose in the morning it was raging again. Snow had drifted almost to the top of the barn, insulating it warmly. He waited for daylight, and then plodded out to do his chores. He estimated it was at least thirty or thirty-five below zero.

The Flying W mare had suffered in the open corral, refusing even to take shelter against the side of the barn, but she still would not come in when he turned the other horses out to water. She drank with them and then went back to shiver in the far corner of the corral. The tank, which he had heated with a roaring fire at one side, froze over almost instantly. The horse could not survive another night like this, and he could not turn her out to take a chance on natural shelter. By now the drifts were too high.

He went inside and stood looking down at the dead man in the feed bin, and after a moment made up his mind.

"Out you go! A dead man has less to expect from this world than a live horse."

It would be still harder to explain to Wearne, but he got out a pick and shovel and chopped a grave in the frozen ground. He buried Laclede and covered the grave with boulders, and then the Flying W mare went into the barn willingly.

But by afternoon she was sick. She was hot to the touch, and shivering. Brace spent an hour grinding barley in his little hand coffee grinder. He made a hot mash of it, seasoned it liberally with whiskey from his medicinal quart, and forced her to take it. Blanketed warmly, doused regularly with whiskey, brine and melted lard, the mare showed little improvement nevertheless by nightfall.

Not that he had much hope of saving the mare, but more because it gave him something to do, Brace sat up with her most of the night. He thought once that she was dying, and he blew out his lantern and went to the house, noting that his clock said midnight. An hour later he went back, and she seemed better, and he decided that she had only been showing the effects of the whiskey. He laboriously warmed a bucket of water on the stove. She drank it eagerly. At four o'clock he made another hot mash, this time without the whiskey. She ate it without forcing.

"A good thing, too, old girl. The whiskey's all gone," he yawned, rubbing her nose.

As he went back to bed, it seemed to him that the storm was lightening a little. He had been too busy to worry up until now. He had worked all night to save a sixty dollar horse—for whom? For Dug Wearne—while one of Dug's men lay under a cairn!

He stoked the stove and crawled into bed with his .45 on the chair by his bed.

HE WOULD never know which it was that startled him awake—the hands pulling the covers back and pushing him down, or the sudden tattoo of gunfire outside. He came up with a start, his mind a blank, but instinctively clawing for the gun on the chair. The chair was empty.

Then he looked up and saw Hy Mackelly standing beside the bunk. It was mid-morning. The fire had almost died in the stove. Outside, it was clear, and cold—so cold that Hy's bearded face was entirely coated with a thick frost-rime. The Circle Star man was a big, rangy man of middle age. He lacked Dug Wearne's brutal ugliness, but in his square jaw and black eyes were pride and stubbornness. No two adversaries were ever better matched than he and the Flying W boss.

"Get up, Brace," he said quietly. He had Brace's gun in his hand and the Flying

W man's two guns in the pocket of his mackinaw. He gestured with Brace's, and Brace heard a man howl with anguish outside, and firing broke out again—at least a dozen guns popping spitefully. "Showdown time, Brace," Mackelly said coldly. "I wondered how long you'd try to get away with it."

Brace put out his hand for his gun—a good try, and one he had to make. It was useless. Hy backed up and levelled it, and his eyebrows came down.

"Don't try it. I'll take no chances with you. One of my men is dead already, because of you. Talk fast, boy. Where did Laclede and Bender go? They're not with Wearne's bunch. Wearne's not half as important today as those two hell-hounds. Where are they?"

Bender, Brace surmised, would be the little two-gun killer he met up in Wearne Canyon. He sat up and felt for his boots, shivering, listening to the noise outside. After a moment he made sense of it. One of Hy's men ran to the door, looked in, and shouted, "We drove 'em out of the barn, Hy! They's a Flying W mare in there with a blanket on."

Hy nodded.

"Keep 'em moving. Don't let 'em get set again."

The man ran out, reloading as he ran. Hy let Brace stand up and dress. Brace opened the stove, filled it, and went to the window. Hy motioned him away from it, but not before he had a clear picture of what was going on outside.

The Circle Star men had arrived first, and had had the initial advantage of the cover of Brace's haystacks. Dug Wearne's men could have ridden down only a few moments later. Probably Hy had seen them coming and had taken cover in time. Dug had held the barn once, but he had fallen back from it to the shelter of a low ridge. Hy held the buildings, such as they were.

Brace turned around slowly, sick at heart. At least a dozen men on each side were firing at each other, methodically and with deadly accuracy and patience. On a morning when men, by nature, should have been clinging to a warm stove and swapping yarns, they were crouched out in the bitter cold trying to kill each other. There was one dead man, a crumpled form in a patch of snow so red that he must have been hit by a dozen slugs at once.

He looked up at Hy Mackelly.

"I guess it wouldn't do any good to say I'm just in the middle and haven't taken sides?"

"You know better than that, Brace."

"It wouldn't do any good to tell you that your men got Laclede—and I can show you his body? Can I tell you I beat the tar out of Bender and chased him home, that I took a horse and two guns away from him and made him run like a rabbit?"

Hy's big hand clenched spasmodically on the gun, and for an instant, Brace scented death.

"No it wouldn't. My men never fired a shot!" Mackelly rumbled. "Laclede and Bender ambushed Ken Scott and Joe Chantry from behind. They killed Ken, but Joe got away, tracked them this way until the storm got the best of him. They were headed for your place. There's a Flying W horse in your barn—a mare. Where's the gelding Bender rode? *Where's Bender and Laclede?*"

Things fitted into place for Brace then. He took a step toward Mackelly. . . .

"A MAN must first be rich, and old, and bull-headed, to be a fool like you, Hy," he said softly. "I'm just a little man. I guess I ought to get down on my hands and knees and crawl out of the way when two big men meet on my property. I've been doing it for a long time. I don't think I will any more."

His left hand shot out in a feint. Hy mechanically pulled the gun up. Brace

went in under it and clawed at the two black ones in the pocket of the rancher's mackinaw. Hy pulled the trigger, and the slug went through the stovepipe, showering them both with soot. Hy was a big man, and powerful; he was a skilled fighter, and he knew no fear, but Brace was fighting with the advantage of youth.

He caught Hy on the temple, and the big man crumpled a little. Brace kicked at his shins, toppling him. Hy managed to fire again, and the bullet coursed up and across Brace's arm, and his whole side went numb for a moment, and then the whole arm blazed. He kicked again, this time at the gun. He hit Hy's elbow instead, and the gun dropped. Brace stooped and picked it up, breathing hard.

"You're too old for this kind of roughhouse, Hy," he said.

He did not bother about the other gun. A man yelled outside, and shooting began again. Up the hill he could hear Dug Wearne's hoarse, raucous bellow. It was a voice without fear. Dug was preparing to fight as long as necessary, regardless of the cold, of wounds, of anything. This was showdown.

Brace stepped outside, buckling his gun belt behind him. The ache and burn in his left arm was the last straw, the push that sent him over the precipice of rage. He saw a Circle Star man at the edge of the house. The man blanched, turned awkwardly and tried to fire. Brace finished buckling the holster and grabbed at his gun. The man ran, and Brace grinned crookedly; his reputation was a good friend after all.

He stepped out into the open in time to see a gray horse pelting down the trail toward them. He recognized Bender just as the little gunman dropped off, skidding and rolling to cover in the snow. He understood also why Bender was here. Disarmed and disabled, he would not be expected to join in the fight, but on the other hand he did not dare stay far behind. He had followed the Flying W men at a distance, to be on hand when Dug Wearne and Brace Shelton had it out. The showdown gunfight, booming up in billows of sound through the icy air, had made it even more urgent that he be there. *And Brace knew why!*

He stepped out into the open and roared

BRAND OF THE DESERT DAMNED!

Four men, shot in the back under that hell-hot sun of the desert wasteland, came back from their lonely graves to free Private Larch Regan, U. S. Army, from his Yuma dungeon, and send him on a lonely, twisting trail, that would bring him a chance for an empire's gold—and to one last roll-call beneath the snarling guns of bushwhack killers! You don't want to miss this unusual story of the Army on the early frontier by Marvin DeVries heading your way in the April issue of *.44 WESTERN MAGAZINE*. Also, other top tales by such top hands of Western fiction as James Shaffer, Latham, Brown, Windas, and many others. Get your copy at your favorite newsstand *today!*

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Dug's name, and a rattle of shots dropped harmlessly in front of him. The distance was too great for .45's, and he was safe so long as he stood where he was. But he heard Hy Mackelly come out of the cabin behind him. He walked on a little farther, shouting Dug's name.

"Dug! Get up like a man and come down and fight like a man if you've got it in you. If it's me you want, here I am! Because if you don't, I'm coming up there. I'm going to get Bender. You'd better give him a gun, Dug, because I'm going to kill him."

He walked on, and he saw Bender stand up, cool and confident now because he had a gun in his hand. He was small and fleshless, a bundle of cool, trained nerves and muscles good for nothing except to load and fire a .45 revolver.

He kept walking, smiling as he saw the mess he had made of Bender's face. Bender was good, but he had taken a beating. Bender was good, but it was thirty or forty below zero. . . .

Brace walked up, measuring the space until they were in range of each other. He went for his gun then, standing a little sideways, spreading his legs the way Bender did, firing from his guts as Bender fired. He got two shots away, saw them both smash into the little man's chest. He heard Bender's gun go off, and he felt the wind of its bullet, and then Bender made a bubbling sound and rolled on his side in the snow. Brace holstered his gun.

"You, Wearne," he said. "Get off my place. The next time you want to cross it, send ahead and ask permission. After you've crossed a few times without getting into trouble, you won't have to ask.

"You, Mackelly, that goes for you too. You've been fighting over something that isn't yours. This is *my* place—not just this little patch here, but all of Deer Track. I'm not squatting in the middle any more. I'm standing here! I'm not asking you—I'm giving orders. I'm the king of Deer Track, and I'll kill the first man who trespasses again."

Wearne was slow-witted, and it took him longer to grasp a thing than it did Hy Mackelly, who was waiting to hear the rest of it. Dug started running down the slope, yelling defiance. Brace yanked at his gun and pumped two slugs into the ground, and Wearne rolled in the snow, scrambling for cover. Brace laughed.

"Your two prize men went hunting for Circle Star men the other night. They killed one—from behind. No great loss; I knew Ken Scott and shooting was too good for him. Score one for Flying W. If you think you're even because Hy killed Laclede, you're mistaken, Dug. It was Bender that killed him! That's why he didn't dare let me come to the Flying W yesterday. That's why he didn't dare let you talk to me today. That's the kind of men you've both been hiring.

"Well, you're through. There's nothing to fight over any more, because I've got it. I don't care whether you shake hands or not. I don't care what you do, just so you don't ever bother me again. Both of you can use Deer Track range—but I'll set the terms. *Now, get off of my property!*"

He started back toward the cabin, and the last thing he remembered was reaching for the corner of it to steady himself. His arm had stopped aching for some reason, but he was deathly sick, and his temples throbbed, and he had never imagined a man could feel this cold and live. . . .

When he awakened he could hear Dug Wearne and Hy Mackelly quarreling, but they were quarreling over whether Dug had sense enough to handle a touchy stallion like Shady or whether Hy should, and it was night, and there was soup in the pot on the stove. Probably they would quarrel like this the rest of their lives, Brace thought dreamily, but with a dang good man between them.

LUCK OF THE DAMNED

By Jeb Ford

Old Lady Fortune dealt right off the bottom of the deck to Jim Hackett!

WHEN Jim Hackett started out to walk from Ramapo to San Antonio, he had no idea how far it was. And when he had been out on the Texas plains for a few days, he soon lost track of how far he had gone. The endless miles of sage stretched out before him and his tired feet shuffled, one after the other, over the waste.

He walked with his head down, his shoulders drooping, his face bleak with unhappiness. No wonder, back in Ramapo, they had called him Bad Luck Hackett. Although, he was a young man, only a little past thirty, he had certainly experienced a life's share of misfortunes. And lately it seemed as though everything he touched had turned to dust under his fingers. Some of the more ignorant citizens were downright superstitious of him and fled at his approach as though he were a living jinx.

There was some substance, of course, to his reputation. Take the Grand Forks stampede, for instance. Jim had worked hard all spring, herding a bunch of longhorns up from the border. He got them within fifty feet of the loading pen, and what happened? The critters stampeded in every direction. Jim not only failed to make a penny off his season's work, but had to pay a pretty penny for damage done to private property.

After that, he went to work breaking horses. They were wild ones, but he tamed them down. The day, however, that he disposed of the last mustang, his own fifteen-year-old mount that he had raised on sugar, threw him, broke both his arms, and then stomped him severely and cracked two ribs.

It worried him and made him terribly unhappy to know that his neighbors regarded him as a jinx and, what was worse, he was beginning to suspect they were right. Now he was limping along to new pastures, to see if his luck would change. He had left his pretty wife, Sarah, and their two year old son, behind. He hoped to send for them soon.

Wearily, he sat down to rest his feet in the mud that remained in the bottom of a drying creek bed. He rested for half an hour and as he straightened he was overtaken by a column of marching men. Lonely, and hoping for a meal, he fell in with the volunteer soldiers. They were headed for a little fort up the line, they told him, where trouble was expected from the Mexicans.

Jim stuck with them as they marched into the fort some hours later. It was an old mission, he discovered, looking around, and remembering that his wife liked strange places he wrote her a letter, describing his new companions. He felt decidedly more cheerful as he finished the letter. "They are a fine bunch of men," he wrote, "maybe my luck is changing already." Just as he handed the letter to the last mail rider, he remembered that he had forgotten to tell Susan where to reach him. He wrote the brief address, and the date on the back of the envelope: JIM HACKETT, The Alamo, March 5, 1836.

The mailrider grabbed the letter impatiently and raced off into the night. . . .

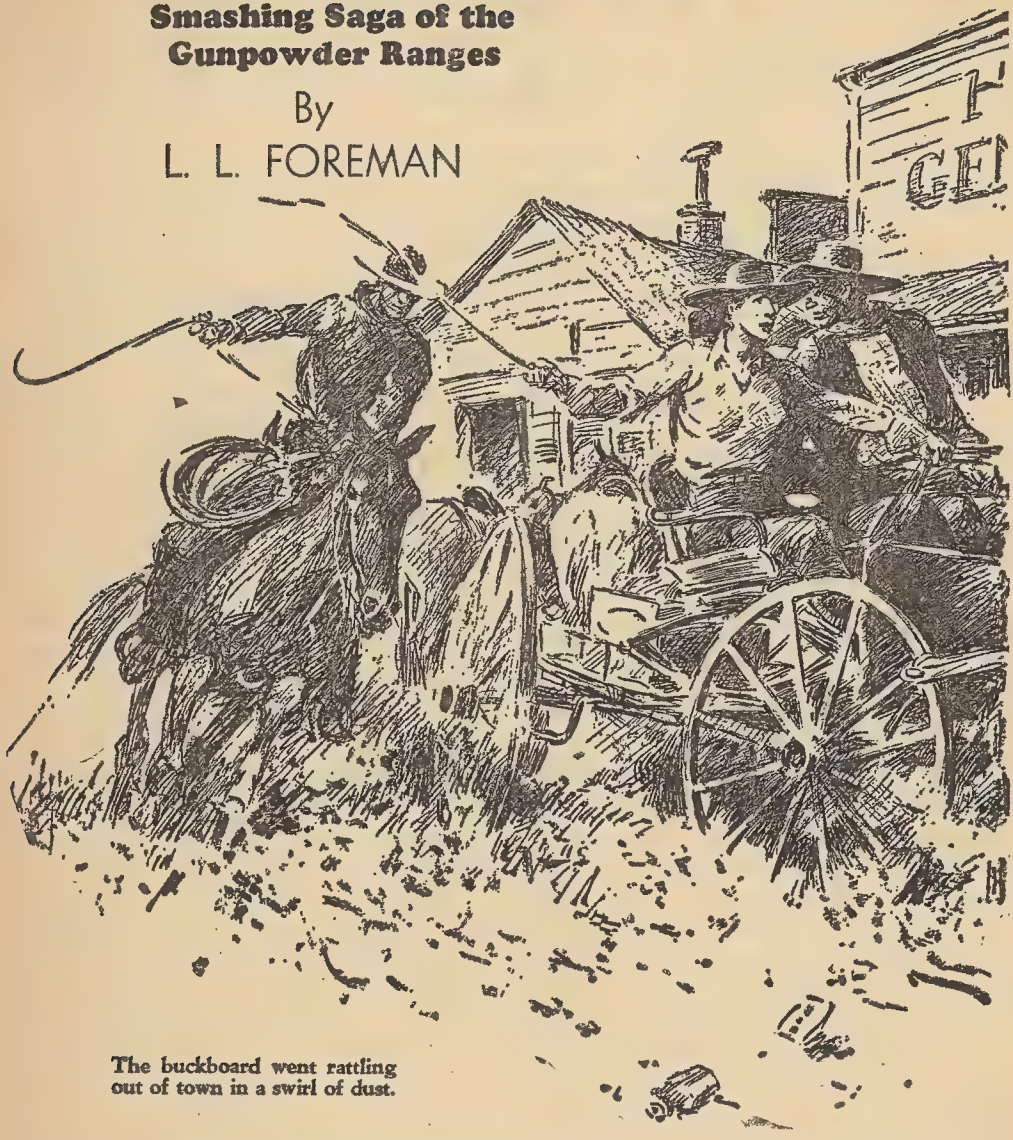
THE END

SPIT IN

Smashing Saga of the Gunpowder Ranges

By

L. L. FOREMAN



The buckboard went rattling out of town in a swirl of dust.

A hunted outlaw, Brad Magoffin had plenty of reason to step soft and easy in that Crimway cowtown—but five minutes after he'd ridden in, he'd gun-whipped two men to boothill—and felt the twin barrels of a cocked scattergun where his suspenders crossed chousing him to the juzgado followed by the angry mutterings of fifty hardcases already knotting a rope, which, figured the slick town boss, would give Brad the choice of joining them, or playing cat's paw for the most ruthless bunch of range-wreckers ever to blight an honest cattle empire!

DEATH'S EYE!

CHAPTER ONE

Brasada Brad's Return

ACCORDING to his intentions Brad Magoffin should have ridden quietly and casually into this Crimway cowtown, avoiding notice until he could get a line on the set-up. The main-street's straight length showed empty in the slumbering afternoon, except for a few horses drooping at the hitch-racks outside the Lucky Draw and the smaller Hogan's Bar farther along the broadwalk. It looked tranquil, Brad Magoffin decided, and he hoped it would stay that way. He didn't want trouble.

He had rarely given much thought to dodging an issue whenever one cropped up. There were times when he wondered if that was a fault in him. So often it led to explosive violence and the aftermath of long trails with ghosts of the mind riding above the dust of pursuit. He had no desire to tip the lid off here, unless the set-up forced it.

He racked his bony big sorrel outside the livery, left it there saddled and ready in case matters went wrong, and sent a slow glance of recollection to left and right. The sheriff's office, if he recalled correctly, squatted back between the higher buildings of the hay-and-grain store and Harmishaw's Emporium. He started across toward it, but paused and stepped back. A girl had come out of the emporium, carrying a few wrapped packages, and as if he'd been watching for her, a man emerged from the hay-and-grain store an instant later.

Brad Magoffin murmured, "Dammit," and fiddled with the sorrel's cinch. He wanted to reach the sheriff's office unobserved by anybody, if possible. He saw the girl coming over to the livery, walking fast. She was a straight-back and chin-up little thing, somehow reminding him of a fine young pony, all fire and pepper, but probably gentle in the right hands.

The man lengthened his stride after her. His good town clothes marked him as a well-to-do tradesman, his polished riding boots indicated cattle interests, and the diamond in his white shirt front hinted of green-topped gambling tables. He had heavy jowls, thick brows bushed over black eyes, and in manner he balanced between somber dignity and a cool dashing charm. He caught up with the girl as she was passing by Brad Magoffin, and took her arm. "Just a minute," he commanded calmly, and swung her around to face him as he might have done to a dancehall girl. "I want to talk to you."

"Let go of me!" The girl's voice was low, hushed, and about as gentle as that of a young she-lion at bay.

Brad Magoffin sighed. The world sure was going to hell, when a diamond-studded dude could brace a nice girl in broad daylight and not get shot for it. He thumbed the sorrel, jumped clear, and growled. "Hey, watch out, you!" Considerately, with a drive of his shoulder he bunted the man out of possible peril and halfway across the street headlong into the ruts. The sorrel kicked air viciously.

"Thank you," the girl said, hurrying on into the livery stable.

"Welcome," said Brad Magoffin, touching his black sombrero, and putting his attention on the man who was getting to his feet. He guessed he had upset a pretty big Crimway citizen, maybe the biggest. The arrogant glare of the man blazoned furiously outraged authority.

"WHAT the devil d'you mean by—" The voice was a gritty rasp.

"That nag o' mine blows his cork at the damnedest times. I reckon maybe I saved your life." With one hand Brad Magoffin grabbed the bridle and saved the reins from snapping. He kept the other hand hanging, and added solemnly, "Sure sorry."

The black eyes rested on his gun in its plain, low-cut holster, and whipped back to his dark, hard face. The signs of a long and turbulent back-trail were on Brad Magoffin, and he knew it and and the black eyes knew. He carried the recognizable air of solitude, the half mocking indifference that masked only partly the alert watchfulness, the coldly fatalistic stare of a gunfighter. The man with the diamond turned and strode off.

Brad Magoffin got his sorrel's temper smoothed down some, and looked up and down the street. The incident had gone by with small notice. He heard the girl

speak to the liveryman, asking him to put her packages in the buckboard, and he walked on over to the sheriff's office.

He entered the door of the sheriff's little office swiftly, quietly, his right hand almost touching his worn holster. In here it was shadowy and cool, after the hot blaze of the street, and it seemed empty. An unreasoning anger and impatience rose in him suddenly, and he called, "Sheriff! Where are you?"

In the gloom at the rear, where the cells were, a slow voice answered, "Right here, lookin' at you, mister! What do you want?" A large bulk moved, coming forward.

Brad Magoffin felt his flat, wide lips go dry. He said, "Is that you, Britt? It don't sound like you. You got fat. Know me?"

"No." The sheriff came on, heavy on his feet, a man made lazy by the easy backwash of petty power. But his eyes were sharp. "No, I don't know you. Not yet." His gaze drifted up the tall dark figure, paused momentarily at the low-cut holster, and lifted more quickly to the face. "Mebbe," he said dryly, "I will, after I look through my stack o' dodger bills!"

Brad Magoffin swung back to the door. "My mistake. I—"

"Stick around." The sheriff's voice had command in it. "No mistake. I'm the sheriff. My name's Joley. Yours?"

Brad Magoffin took time to answer. He said at last, "I been called Brasada Brad."

"Ah." Sheriff Joley eased his weight into a battered old swivel chair. "Now I guess I know you! Heard o' you, anyhow. Sit down, Brasada. You lookin' for Britt, eh? H'm. Britt Longwill? He was—er—my predecessor in office here. Funny you knew him. He didn't last long as sheriff. Too—well, I'd say he was too damn hardworkin'. Know what I mean?"

"Took his badge too serious?" Brad's tone thinly veiled a harsh cynicism.

The fat sheriff contemplated him steadily. "M'mm—yeah. Me, I just sit around here an' use my head. It's tough country. Some tough citizens."

"Where," asked Brad, "would I look for Britt Longwill now?"

"That's a hard question. Y'see, he's dead! Ask Turck Thurlow, over at the Lucky Chance. He knows more about it than I do. I wasn't here then." Joley's eyes stayed fixed on Brad's face, studying it, searching for reactions. "You musta wanted to see Britt Longwill pretty bad."

"Yeah." Brad moved on to the door.

"Say—one thing more," Joley called after him, and heaved himself up out of the creaking chair. He stood solidly on his feet, blinking his eyes lazily. "You got all mornin' to rest up an' move on, *sabe*? It's tough enough in this town without you, Mister Brasada Brad!"

"You take your badge too serious," Brad commented.

Joley shook his head. "No, you're thinkin' o' Longwill, my predecessor. Me, I just sit around here an' use my head. But I get things done occasionally, one way or other."

The fat sheriff watched Brad recross the street. In his leisure he cultivated a few fancies, and it occurred to him that the Brasada man was like a lance from alien wars. Wild times and places had marked that man, scarred him, but had not warped the hard, smooth, seasoned timber of him. It would be a miracle if hell didn't get ripped wide open in Crimway before tomorrow morning. The sheriff yawned and went back to his chair.

THE girl stood on the boardwalk in front of the Lucky Draw, apparently trying to make up her mind to go in. Seeing her there ahead of him as he

crossed over, Brasada Brad scowled and wondered if he'd pulled an error in spilling the man who had braced her. If she was the kind who'd hang around a saloon. . . .

But she sure looked like a nice girl. "Huntin' some more trouble?" he queried, coming up behind her.

She turned, and he was sorry he'd said it. Her eyes were dark with a desperate anxiety. She said frigidly, "My brother is in there. If you're going in, will you tell him I'm ready to go home? You'll know him—he's wearing a blue shirt with black pockets. Thank you."

"Uh," he replied, finding nothing better to say, and stepped on to the cutaway batwing doors. From habit, he took full survey of the interior before shoving on through. He was glad, then, that the girl wasn't tall enough to look over the batwings. A killing was building up. He saw and sensed it at once, and checked off the details with only a remote and professional interest until he noticed that the proposed deceased was wearing a blue shirt with black pockets. And that explained for him the desperate anxiety in the eyes of the girl. She had a fearful expectancy of something like this.

He scowled. Dammit, he had business of his own to tend to, without tangling in the problems of a girl he'd never seen before and would never see again. He pushed the doors open, and the sound of his bootheels on the bare floorboards drew sharply inquiring eyes to him. Idly, he moved to one side and lounged against the wall. The glances abandoned him, and he studied the layout.

The man with the diamond sat at a table, in company with two other men, absently twirling an empty glass between his fingers. His eyes stabbed at Brasada Brad, took arrogant regard of him, and snapped their attention back to the bar. Men were clotted at both ends of the bar, leaving space in the middle. Mostly, they were gun-wearing men. They had flexible-looking fingers that were not rope-calloused. Their kind was known to Brasada Brad. He, too, was a gun-wearing man, and his brown fingers were smooth, muscular, capable of efficiently manipulating whatever they grasped.

The bar's cleared middle was the magnet holding all men's attention. There, two men talked quietly, interspacing their remarks with lengthy pauses. One, long-limbed, so loosely built that he appeared double-jointed as he hung draped against the bar, had the kind of pale, bright eyes that could convey an insult better than words. The other, in the blue shirt, was a youth with an angry face and no gun visible on his slim person.

The youngster said tautly, "I came in to talk to Thurlow. I came in without a gun, so's there'd be no excuse for a fight. What are you trying to do, Labaucher?"

Labaucher slid a long arm over the bar, picked up his glass and drained it. "Better if you'd sent your sister," he commented.

"Leave her out of it!" rapped the boy.

Labaucher grinned faintly. He reached for a bottle to refill his glass. The movement caused his left hip to stick out. The butt of the gun, jutting forward, stuck out even farther. A right-hand cross-draw man, this.

The action was too careless. And too, too premeditatively careful. To Brasada Brad, scanning the play as it proceeded step by step, it had no more novelty and puzzlement than that of a stale card trick. It was a blatant build-up for murder, and a raw disgrace to any gunfighter with an ounce of pride in his deadly craft.

Labaucher, guiding the trick toward its conclusion, drawled, "What? Leave your sister out? Kid, you ask too much." He threw his left hip farther forward, and the gun butt poked out like a proffered hand.

Brasada Brad thought detatchedly,

Here it comes. Oh well, they lived and learned—or, anyhow, learned. The attitudes of the barroom bunch were those of spectators, amused, well aware of what to expect and eager to see its finish.

"But if we leave her out, let's leave her where I can find her!" Labaucher said, and right then the youngster snatched at the poking butt and got the gun in his hand.

"I'll make you crawl for that, Labaucher!"

It was pitiful, Brasada Brad thought, how much the kid had to learn in a damned brief speck of time. Labaucher gazed at his own gun covering him, and for the appearance of the thing he aped some surprise, but his voice was languid when he said over his shoulder, "Hey, see that? He's gonna kill me with my own shooter! Loan me a gun, somebody, so's I'll have an even break!"

Somebody immediately obliged. A gun came sliding down the bar. While it slid, the youngster pulled the trigger of the gun he'd grabbed. He pulled it four times, and each time the hammer clicked on an empty cylinder. And while he stood there working the unloaded gun, Brasada Brad thought unwillingly of the anxious girl waiting outside. Easily, like an experienced croupier catching the roulette ball on the spin, Labaucher poised his hand to receive the sliding gun. The onlookers were very still.

BRASADA BRAD took a couple of steps forward. His mind was reluctant to acknowledge the task, but the impulse was too strong to be overruled. He had long known that he just wasn't fashioned to be neutral. When trouble boiled around him, somehow he generally found himself up to his neck in it sooner or later. There was no peace for the lawless, no rest for a gunman except that last long repose in boothill. His fingers stroked worn leather and closed around black walnut.

His single shot crashed into the waiting silence, and for a moment the watching men blinked at Labaucher confusedly. Labaucher hadn't caught the sliding gun, and it required that moment to realize that he never would; that it wasn't he who had fired the shot. The gun had spun suddenly, inches from his hand, and gone skidding over the back edge of the bar. A bartender stooped instinctively to pick it up, and quickly changed his mind and backed off.

Labaucher spat, "Damn it, who—" and jerked his face around, all the insolent, indolent sureness brushed out of him. His brightly shallow eyes found Brasada Brad, and he pinned his glare on him, gunman to gunman.

Brasada Brad said to the blue-shirted youngster, "Your sister's waiting for you outside. You better go." They were all staring at him, more still and silent than

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ever. He inwardly cursed his impulse for being stronger than his logic, and he kept watch on Labaucher.

The lanky gunman was moving backward along the bar toward the group nearest behind him. He dropped his right arm and held it hidden by his body, but he couldn't hide the mad purpose in his eyes, the craving hunger to get his hand on a gun. The intentions of the others were equally naked. They were standing by until Labaucher made his play, ready to pitch in and help blast down the stranger who had wrecked the gun-trap game. The man with the diamond began twirling his glass again, fast, angrily.

There was always the trick, the double play, the lurking teamwork to look for. Brasada Brad allowed himself an instant to look for it, and guessed its source when he spotted the expression of a chunky little dodger in checked green pants at the other end of the bar. The little guy had a trick derby hat. He held the derby against his waist, and gazed with owlish intensity at Labaucher. Brasada Brad wondered whether it was a four-shot Shattuck palm pistol or an Elliot single-shot that the boiled lid covered.

He let Labaucher bump backward into the group, gave him time to fill his hidden right hand from the holster of the nearest man, and turned to the little jigger just in time to spot the round eye of a derringer muzzle come peeping shyly over the derby-brim. His body swung left and right in one swift, smooth movement, and his gun roared out the termination to each pivot. He let the gun range farther afield then, and a beginning flurry of activity abruptly ceased among the two groups at the bar.

Critical appraisal and curiosity played their part. The speed of the two shots challenged accuracy, and the men looked to see how wild was the aim. But the little gunman, gripping his punctured derby, was taking a faltering step toward a chair and dropping his hog-snout shooter. And Labaucher was making a harsh sound and trying to prop himself up with an elbow hooked futilely over the bar.

The echoes of the shots rang musically among the clustered bottles along the backbar shelves, and died. "Easy, everybody!" Brasada Brad said, and he spoke almost wearily. Soon, there would be the ghosts again, the aftermath, the struggle to blank out the memory. Violence was a heady drink that went flat and stale so soon.

"Easy, *you*!" grunted a voice behind him. "Let go that gun!"

He glanced over his shoulder. Sheriff Joley, with a shotgun resting on the swing doors and aimed at the back of his neck, queried, "Is this good enough for you?"

"I reckon," Brad said, and let his gun fall.

"I *told* you I got things done, one way or other," Joley reminded him, and looked aside at the man with the diamond. "He says he came here to see Britt Longwill, Thurlow."

Turck Thurlow, who had continued spinning his glass all through, allowed it to roll off the table and break on the floor. "He'll soon get to meet him!" he observed, and his eyes flickered. "He's killed Labaucher. And Tad Toole, about. Yes, sheriff, surprising, eh? *He got Tad Toole*! Only two shots fired. That fellow fired both of them."

"H'm!" said the sheriff. "I knew I wouldn't get much more rest today, soon's I saw him." He pushed open a door and touched Brasada Brad on his neck with the muzzle of the shotgun. "C'mon, Mister Brad o' Brasada! Step nice an' slow. I got a real good cell swept out an' readied for you! Only thirty minutes here, an' already you gun two citizens—an' one of 'em Tad Toole! Crime an' snakes!"

CHAPTER TWO

Hell's Hiring Guns!

THE cell could have been goldplated, for all Brasada Brad knew. Joley didn't steer him into it, because Turck Thurlow followed them over and inquired, "What did he want to see Longwill about? Did he know him?"

"Ask him, I don't know." The sheriff seated himself in the battered swivel chair, shotgun handy across his knees. "You want to question him, Thurlow? You can—you're the mayor," he said, and then Brasada Brad knew for certain he'd spilled the biggest man in Crimway.

Thurlow took a seat at the sheriff's desk. He drew a finely engraved and gold-mounted Lemat revolver from under his coat, and held it in his hand, resting on the desk, and said, "Sit down, er—what did you say his name is, sheriff?"

"Brasada Brad. He's the hombre—you know—who gunned the brass out o' the Brasada land syndicates, there in Texas. Tough jigger. Watch him!"

"I'm watching him!" responded Thurlow, finger on the trigger of his three-hundred-dollar gun. "Brasada, how well did you know Britt Longwill?"

"Just a friendly question, y'understand," put in Joley. "I got you for murder—an' don't think I can't make it stick! You can't lose anything by friendly talk, see? And anything you say here won't be held against you as evidence." His gaze was deep and level. "You can talk. It might do you good."

Brasada Brad considered them both. He sat down on the bench against the wall, and unhurriedly built himself a smoke while he thought it over. Cynicism whispered to him that these two men had something to gain. Where men had gain in view, there they had a weakness that might be utilized. He was in a bad jackpot, and needed to find a weak chink in the wall of circumstances enclosing him.

"All right." He lighted his cigarette, and broke the match. "I'll tell you. Britt and I were partners, six years ago, in a fair-to-middlin' ranch. The Bar T. We did all right, till the Currycomb Company moved in as neighbors. They liked our range. They beat us. They beat us by the simple way a Bar T brand can be changed into a Currycomb brand. Think it over a minute an' you see it."

Joley smiled. "I see it. One more bar added, an'—"

"Yeah." Brasada Brad drew at his cigarette. "Add to that about thirty gunmen, and you get what we were up against. So we went broke. So we were sore. So we took to raiding the Company's cattle, taking what they'd took from us. We sold our gather in Mexico, mostly. We started to get well again. We were doing all right. A little risky, but better'n starving. Britt was a good guy to tie to—then. He was right there. But things change. So do men."

"Certainly do," commented Thurlow. "I've broken the Company and run it out. Some of the Company hands are on my payroll now!"

Brasada Brad looked at him. So?" he said. But he was thinking that it was of small benefit to swap one range-robber for another. "One night the Company men caught up with us," he went on. "I held 'em off while Britt got clear, and in the morning they took me. I've seen your jail before, sheriff! I broke out of it. Britt helped me. They had no evidence against him, so he and I came to a quick agreement. The cash we'd saved was banked in his name, so—"

"You were trusting!" remarked Thurlow.

Brasada Brad nodded. "Sure. We were close pals, Britt and I. We'd gone through a lot together. Well, we didn't have much time. A posse was after me. Britt agreed to stick it out here, while

I went off on the long dodge. We said goodbye, and parted. He was to send me my share if I needed it, any time. He swore to that."

"He got the best o' the bargain, seems like," put in Joley, crossing his legs. "Way I hear it, he got a pretty good little cattle spread started an' built it up to somethin' sizeable. Got to be a citizen of standin', too. They finally made him sheriff. What did you get out of it?"

"Experience and a reputation!" replied Brasada grimly. "As I said, I went off on the long dodge—a cattle rustler an' jail breaker! There was only one trail open for a man like me. While I rode it, I could always tell myself that some day I'd be able to quit it. Wasn't Britt buildin' up a good spread for us both?"

His eyes were dark and sardonic with remembrance. "Britt used to write to me, when I lit anywhere long enough for a letter to catch up with me. He was goin' good. He'd fix it up so's I could come back an' we'd be ranch partners again. Yeah. Then he wrote he'd been made sheriff. That was the last I heard. He never wrote again. I reckon," he said, "he took his badge serious. Eh Joley?"

"Sure did," agreed Joley, after a glance at Thurlow. "He got killed, less'n a month after he pinned it on! He couldn't write to you. He was dead! That right, Thurlow You tell him. You know about it, an' I only know what I've heard."

THURCK THURLOW nodded slowly, gravely. "He'd started the Bar T up again. He was killed on the front porch. Shot. Who did it? Listen, and judge for yourself, Brasada. Longwill had a foreman, name of McGrath. When he became sheriff he gave McGrath a free hand to run the ranch. McGrath brought Longwill's body in, said he didn't see who fired the shot. Next day he came in again, and showed a bill of sale on the ranch, representing he'd bought the place from Britt Longwill before the killing. Britt Longwill hadn't banked any big money, and none was found on his body. But McGrath had that bill of sale—and he's got that Bar T ranch right now! What would you say the answer is, Brasada?" He smiled, and his eyebrows turned up and his lips turned down. It wasn't a merry smile.

Brasada Brad said leadenly, "This McGrath, he forged the bill of sale, then put a bullet in Britt. Or, somebody downed Britt, an' McGrath made the most of it for himself. It sounds that way. Britt never would've sold out without me. I know it now. I thought hard of him when he quit writing. I know better now."

He got up off the bench. "You can quit jinglin' those keys in your pocket, sheriff! Which is my cell?"

"Hold it!" Thurlow waved him back with the gold-mounted pistol. "I haven't been talking just to bring you up to date on Crimway history," he said.

Brasada Brad knew damned well he hadn't. He waited, cocking an inquiring eyebrow. "Shoot," he said. "With your mouth, I mean—not the pretty gun!"

Thurlow didn't quite know how to take that. People didn't talk to him that way. His thick brows drew together, but he let it pass. "When I took over the Currycomb Company, I took over its problems." he divulged. "The Bar T is the only problem I haven't been able to settle. As you said, the Company liked your range and wanted it. So do I. I need it, to round out my range and have full use of the river. Any cattleman can see that, and everybody knows it. It's no secret, is it, Joley?"

The sheriff shook his head, and Brasada Brad thought again how little profit there was in swapping one range-robber for another. Where ambition concentrated on acquisition, there you had a man who could never be satisfied and never know

contentment. He could almost pity Turck Thurlow.

"I think," Thurlow went on, "Longwill was just about ready to do business with me, when he was killed. It threw everything up in the air, that killing. Andrew McGrath won't sell, and even if he would, he couldn't produce a clear title to the place. The bill of sale is all he can show, and he hasn't recorded it, so he's the owner mostly by possession. Maybe you could change that situation, Brasada!"

"How?"

"I don't care how. That's your problem. It'd be worth your while." Thurlow glanced aside at the sheriff and back at Brasada Brad. "If I and the others couldn't remember who fired those shots in the Lucky Draw, Joley would have to let you go. Then you'd be able to attend to that Bar T problem. Get that bill of sale away from McGrath! Make him sign a sworn statement that Longwill left the Bar T to you, when he lay dying. There are times," he pronounced piously, "when we're forced to use illegal methods to obtain justice! Isn't that so, Joley?"

" 'Pears that way," agreed Joley. He looked out into the street, and asked, "What happens after that?" He sounded tired.

Thurlow's lips turned down. "Brasada will then sell out to me, I'm sure, at a reasonable price—a very reasonable price, bearing in mind the fact that we can suddenly remember who shot Labaucher and Tad Toole! A ranch isn't much good to a man who's wanted for murder, is it, Brasada?"

Brasada wagged his head slowly. "I wouldn't think so." His voice was mildly meditative, but he had to shield his eyes to keep the rising tide of reckless anger from showing in them. "So you're puttin' me under your orders, eh? H'm!" He flicked a look at Thurlow's pistol, and another at the shotgun.

He had never bowed to threat-backed orders. It was a bit late, he figured, for him to learn. Thurlow was idly tapping on the desk with his pistol, finger on the trigger. Joley, though, had lazily let his shotgun droop until the double muzzles rested on the floor between his feet, his fat hands folded laxly on the butt. A quick leap might stand a chance, a thin chance that grew thinner the more he considered it. He quit making an estimate, and got set to take it.

"Seems to me," he remarked, stringing out time while measuring his distance, "I got no more choice in this deal than—"

He broke off. Distinctly, through the window, he caught sight of a blue-shirted arm poking out from the corner of the hay and grain store. The arm snapped up, and let fly with a rock. He couldn't see how Joley could miss noticing it. The rock came straight for the window, and he ducked. Then Joley ducked, too, out of his chair, in such haste that he got both legs straddled around the shotgun and rode it to a fall. Thurlow swung half around to look for the cause, and the window burst in his face and threw his dash and dignity all out of kilter, an instant before Brasada lunged full into him at the end of his leap.

The hurled rock had come as a surprise to Brasada, but he spent no time in musing how to make the most of it. He rammed Thurlow with a bone-hard shoulder and all his weight behind it, struck hard and savagely at his gun-arm, and the gun spun flashing in the air like an oversized gold-piece. Thurlow spent all his wind in one grunt, and took a flying header into falling glass and halfway out the shattered window.

Beyond the gloom of the cells, a rear door banged open and let in light, and somebody back there shrilled a whistle that was as expressive as an owlhooter's signal. On his way to the urgent invitation, gold-mounted gun in hand, Brasada

paid some passing attention to Sheriff Joley. The sheriff, having fallen over his own shotgun, was slow in bouncing up. He was rising ponderously, rear end first, and Brasada did him no good by scoring a bulls-eye with his boot on the sizeable target. The sheriff over-balanced on his knees and face, the shotgun still underneath him, and swore a blue streak while Brasada headed fast for the rear. It was odd how the sheriff, a capable man in certain circumstances, could be so clumsily inept.

A BUCKBOARD waited in the rear. The girl, holding tight reins on the team, called crisply to Brasada, "Jump in—quick!" And after he landed in behind her, she let out that piercing whistle again and slapped the reins on the team.

They clattered up the short alley, made a sharp turn and ripped splinters off a fence with the rear right hub, then hit the mainstreet at a headlong gait that slithered the buckboard in a cloud of dust. The long street, that had been so slumberous, had suddenly sprung wide awake; it was filling with men, most of them charging out of the Lucky Draw. A slim horseman came careening through the kicked-up dust, bobbing like a rag in the wind, overhauling the buckboard.

Recognizing his sorrel before he took note of the blue-shirted rider, Brasada changed his aim on the last ounce of trigger-pull and slung a shot across the heads of the thickest group. The window of the Luck Draw abruptly became a shifting pattern of slivered glass glinting in the sun. The group spread. The dust boiled denser and made everything a tawny gray. Tardily, a shotgun blared twice from the sheriff's office and lead-shot screamed and pattered along the street.

Somebody yelled, "Jail break!"

The yell and the scrambled sounds were not new to Brasada. He had heard them all before, here and elsewhere, in a life of red roil and violence packed into a few years. He grinned with sardonic glee, for the moment uplifted beyond the boundaries of barren reason. He chopped another shot with the gold-mounted Lemat, and laughed harshly, and the girl in the driver's seat sent him a glance of strange fear.

He was all gunman now, so much so that only the high, sharp point of slaughterous conflict could satisfy the final notch of the gunman's smoke-smeared want within him. The rocking buckboard's wheels slewed into wagon ruts, the last shack on the fringe of town dropped behind, and abruptly there was the quiet serenity of juniper-dotted hills stretching far around to the hazy mountains and empty blue sky. The turbulent urge died in him, and he was able to see some wry humor in having pitched headlong into trouble while trying to tread softly to trouble of his own.

"Good cattle country," he remarked to the girl, and amazed her with his sudden change.

They turned off on a fork angling toward the south, and halted for Brasada to drop off the buckboard and swap for his sorrel. "Thanks for the help." He flashed a grin to the youth.

"Same to you!" came the reply, with an answering grin. "They sure had me up a stump. Thurlow was behind it. He's after our scalps, and I went in to see if I couldn't talk things over with him. But he gave Labaucher the nod."

"Well, I reckon he won't get that partic'lar chance again!" Brasada observed. He swung up into his saddle, and touched his hat to the girl. "Better stay away from Crimway for a while, both o' you."

The girl was watching him, her eyes frankly studying his. "Do you know where you're going?" she asked. "Do you know the country?"

He knew the country, and knew where he was going, but he was reticent about that. "I'll hit south a way, an' maybe hook up with an outfit I—uh—know of."

Brother and sister exchanged glances. The youth said, "How about hooking up with our outfit?"

Brasada shook his head. "Thanks, but I'm not the kind you want," he replied gently. "Y'see, I'm—well—" He found it queerly difficult to say that he was a gunfighting lobo on the long dodge, so he just said, "They call me Brasada."

"You're the kind we do want," the girl assured him.

Her brother nodded agreement. "Sure do! Come on, Brasada, throw in with us. My name's Sid McGrath. This is my sister, Jean. Our Bar T place isn't as big as some, but it's a pretty good outfit when it's running right, and Jean's a swell cook—"

Sid McGrath talked on about what a good outfit the Bar T had been until trouble came, and what a good outfit it could be again. Jean McGrath put in a word here and there, too. They were persuasive, insistent, eagerly wishful for the sixgun stranger to come to the Bar T.

Brasada didn't listen to most of it. He needed a little time in which to sort out his jumbled thought, to connect one pattern with another.

Jean and Sid fell suddenly silent, gazing startedly at his change of expression. His face had reverted to its hardness and the lines of his wide mouth were cynical and saturnine. He drifted a cool, blank stare over them both, and said softly, "I've heard of an Andrew McGrath. Who's he?"

"He's our dad. You'll like him."

"I bet I will. Well, let's get along. I want to meet him!"

ONE of the grimly necessary lessons that Brasada had learned was, that he should never allow himself to be caught by surprise. It had caught him more than once, this day. It caught him again a short time later when he met Andrew McGrath.

Andrew McGrath was more than a surprise. He was an astonishment. With his sweeping mane of thick white hair, massive brow and gauntly chiseled features, he looked as noble as Moses. His sun-bleached Levi's and flannel shirt could no more lessen his air of distinction than a pack saddle could disguise a thoroughbred. He carried with him a definite hint of kilt and sporran, the measured skirl of highland pipes, and the stern morals of the incorruptible kirk.

He had a long look on Brasada, shaking hands with him, and Brasada had the feeling that the level gray eyes were opening the pages of his past and reading his history. "Jean and Sid are inclined to be impulsive," Andrew McGrath remarked. His voice was deep, with a resonant burr in it. "I wouldn't have asked you to come here, myself."

"Why not?"

"Because it's not fair to any man. From what Sid and Jean tell me, you've already got more trouble at your heels than you'll shake off in a hurry! I thank you, and I'd like to have you, but you better go."

"How many men you got?" Brasada inquired dryly.

The gray eyes regarded him thoughtfully. "None, now. And after what happened in Crimway today, I've got to send Sid and Jean off somewhere. I've got to do it quick. Turck Thurlow at last has an excuse to send his crew here openly, with the sheriff. You're a fugitive, wanted by the law, and that's excuse enough for them to come shooting! Sid helped you escape, so they'll come for him, too. They may even include Jean, to make certain I'll fight and give them the chance to kill me."

"But if nobody but you is here when

they come, they'll have no excuse to shoot," Brasada said. "Is that it?" He wondered if the honest eyes masked cunning self-interest. There was much that was concealed and unexplained about this Andrew McGrath, and he was obviously disposed to go to desperate lengths to keep his hold on the Bar T.

McGrath nodded, his level gaze still fixed meditatively on Brasada's face. "I've managed to step clear of Thurlow's traps, up to now, and I can do it again. You'll be heading down into Mexico for a while, I suppose. Will you take Jean and Sid with you as far as Tombstone? Sid's pretty young and he's never had any experience in dodging posses. I'll pay you for your trouble, if you'll do it."

If this was a ruse to get rid of him, Brasada thought, it indicated that the gray eyes had probed too deeply into him and sensed something suspicious. Anger rose in him. Through the wild and wandering years there had always been the steadying keel, the hope and promise that some day he could settle down again as a cattleman, partner in the Bar T. He had clung to that.

Bedamned if he'd let any false-face Scotsman cheat him of the long-delayed reward. He said harshly, "Never mind the pay. I'll see 'em into the clear, and then I'll be back to tell you what you owe me. I'm ready to start. Call 'em!" It would be best, he decided, to get them out of the way before he moved to collect what was his.

Andrew McGrath sharpened his glance, but then raised it into distance and smiled frostily. "Sooner the better. If yon cloud of dust isn't kicked up by a twenty-horse posse from Crimway, then I need glasses! Oh, Sid! Jean!"

They protested, brother and sister, against the order to leave. It did them little good. Andrew McGrath cut them off short, told them briefly his reasons, pointed to the dust cloud moving down from the north, and gave them the command to hitch up fresh horses to the buckboard. He had an iron manner devoid of sentiment, but when they pulled out of the yard he flung up an arm as if to call them back, and changed the gesture into a wave of farewell. Hipping around in the saddle for a backward look, Brasada saw him shielding his eyes against the sun and gazing after them. The white-maned Scot looked as lonely and stubborn as a stag at bay.

CHAPTER THREE

The Devil Needs Sixguns

BRASADA BRAD, gunman, had to rekindle his anger before he could scowl back at that lonely figure. He had to reach deep down for cynical logic. Hell, there were thieves who wept at their children's sickbed, and murderers who scrupulously honored their family ties. Maybe McGrath wasn't the killer of Britt Longwill, but he had turned the murder into profit and grabbed the Bar T on the strength of a doubtful bill of sale.

They traveled fast, Jean and Sid in the buckboard, Brasada riding guard behind, all three solemnly wordless. In the absence of pursuit, the thought of risk grew remote, and the brisk gait was slackened and the journeying fell into a routine.

It was Sid who broke a long silence. They were crossing the shallow Rio Tuiso ford, and Sid motioned to the scarred banks and passed the remark that horsemen and a sizeable bunch of cows must have come by within the last few hours.

Then, like somebody suddenly waking up and realizing the meaning of a significant sound heard in sleep, Sid said crisply. "Hey, whose cows are they? Who's driving 'em? Where they going?"

Squinting into the sinking sun, he scanned the course of the cattle tracks. Im-

patiently, he slapped the lines and shook up the team. The sun was a red-gold slice narrowing into the horizon when he pulled up the team in the notch of a shouldering hill, and turned and looked at Brasada.

From down in the bottom of the long sweep of a meadow pocket sounded the grumbling bawl of cattle. A campfire cast pink flickers over dark piñones in the lowering dusk, and glowed on restlessly shifting red hides. "They're our cows!" Sid said.

"Who could read a brand in this light?" Brasada queried.

"I know Bar T cows," Sid retorted. "Those are ours! And I know Thurlow's jiggers. I should by this time! There are five of 'em down there, and I could name each one for you. Thurlow is pulling the old Company trick. He must feel pretty sure he's got us whipped."

To Brasada, the old Company trick was as familiar as the sorry jest of the empty gun. He and Britt Longwill had been its victims. He said absently, looking down at the camp, "Yeah. They'll change the Bar T over to the Currycomb brand, push the critters way off for the winter, an' come next spring round-up nobody could say they don't belong in the Currycomb gather."

While he spoke, his mind was playing with other potentials. That bawling bunch of cattle down there was hard cash on the hoof, cash maybe equal to the debt he had come to collect. There were Mexican markets for good, graded stock. A one man drive was a killing job, but Mexico wasn't so far off, and a stray grub-line rider or two might be hired to help along the route.

He reminded himself that he had a better right to those cattle than any other man alive. McGrath, with his fake bill of sale, had no more real title to them than the five Thurlow jiggers. And Britt Longwill wasn't alive, rest his soul.

"Sid," Brasada said, "you cut back a way an' skirt round, an' hurry on to Tombstone with Jean. I'll be stickin' here a while."

Sid's young face flared. "Say! What d'you think I am? Those are Bar T cows, and I'm going to—"

"You're going to Tombstone," Brasada cut in. "You're taking your sister there. That's orders!" He heeled his sorrel over against the team, crowding the team around and ignoring Sid's hot expostulations. He dragged off his heavy black sombrero and slapped the team with it. "S'long, boy! S'long, Jean!"

Watching the buckboard go jouncing off, he fought regret. Life for him was of necessity made up of swift decisions and sudden departures; it was a cobweb road of forks and junctions, and in every choice of route there was a chance of bitter error. He shrugged, and thrust away a bright and impossible vision. "S'long, Jean," he muttered, and slid a predatory stare at the camp in the meadow pocket.

Following the cattle tracks down the sandy bed of an arroyo, he unstrapped his Henry .44 carbine from its saddle scabbard and wiped dust from its iron sights. The sun sank in afterglow and he risked a faster gait. Where the arroyo spread shallowed out near the bottom, he left it and rode aside to higher ground, and took closer scan of the camp.

THURLOW'S Currycomb riders, in no fear of pursuit, were working to bed the cattle down for the night. Brasada picked out three mounted men circling the bunch. Another man was squatting at the fire, tending to the coffepot and frying pan, and the fifth was gathering up dead wood among the piñones.

The light would soon be too poor for accurate shooting. This was a job of brush-fighting that had to be done fast or not at all. Brasada led his sorrel back to

the arroyo, left it ground reined, and went prowling on foot up the slant. Overlooking the camp, he settled on his heels, took aim with the Henry .44, and let fly. In the cool hush of the evening, the shot was a blaring explosion, repeated in echoes from the surrounding hills. The cast-iron frying pan flipped over, the fire threw up sizzling flames from spilled bacon fat, and the startled cook rolled over backward.

Brasada snapped another shell into the breech. A gun spat two quick flashes from beyond the campfire, and the whir of both bullets came close overhead. They were from the wood gatherer. A prompt and dangerous shooter, that jigger. Brasada moved over and squeezed off a return shot, and the wood gatherer, running doubled over, ran blindly into a piñon and stayed there in its low-growing branches. The cook scrambled for cover.

Hoofs thudded and around the bunched cattle rode the mounted trio to look into the matter. No spooky rustlers, these. With the power of Thurlow behind them, they were as ready to defend their stolen loot as if they'd raised the cows from calves. The cattle, made nervous by the gunfire, were beginning to mill, but the pocket held them.

Brasada lined up the sights, waited for the foremost rider to come rocking across his field of view, and braced his shoulder to the solid kick of the Henry. Before the blunt-nosed .44 bullet had ended its growl, he took new aim. The foremost rider came apart from his horse and plowed sand in a spill that should have broken his neck, but he stumbled up while his horse stayed down, and stood swaying.

The Henry roared again, and this time its bullet wrecked the balance of a rider and sent him veering off out of the meadow pocket, hanging low and clutching the saddle horn. The last of the trio reined broadside in a shower of gravel, brought his horse to a standstill and blazed his gun empty, before spurring after him. They were seasoned gunhands, sharp on the fighting edge, but the Henry .44 was a mite too rough for them. Brasada stroked the hammer, and speculated about the cook. The wood gathering sharpshooter was still in the pinon, and would stay there until somebody buried him.

His speculating lasted only until a running horse burst out from the piñones in a swerving course around the pocket. He brought the butt of the Henry to his shoulder, but by the time he got the sights set the cook was thundering down on the man who had lost his horse. Brasada let him pause and haul up the dazed man, and watched the double-burdened horse go tearing out of the pocket. Except for the grumbling of the restless cattle, the ending of gun fire left the evening back in its cool hush.

He gazed down at the cattle. Cash on the hoof, and all his. The hell with useless regrets. This time the choice of route couldn't be wrong. There was a pot of gold at the foot of that rainbow, and with gold a man could shape his life as he wanted. He got up and hurried to his sorrel at the bottom of the arroyo.

"Might stay in Mexico," he muttered to himself. "Not wanted there, far's I recollect—"

THE cattle traveled reluctantly in the light of the rising moon, bawling their complaints against man's rule, strung out in a self-willed and waywardly ragged column that would have shamed a Yaqui sheep-trailing outfit. Brasada dourly suspected that the damned critters knew there was only one rider hazing them. They weren't fooled by his constant switching from one side of the column to the other. He was the same guy and they knew it, and they rolled their eyes, shook their horns, and bellowed insults at him.

He rope-ended a group of belligerent

mutineers back into line, swearing at them, and considered it fairly possible that they'd guessed he was planning to change their nationality. Some of the older steers were giving him mighty disapproving and resentful looks.

"Hey!" called a voice behind him. "Hey—Brasada!"

For a mad moment he thought the old ghosts had finally caught up with him. He spun his horse around, glaring, Thurlow's wickedly handsome Lemat gun cocked in his fist. "Who is it?" he snarled at a drooping horseman plodding toward him. "Name yourself, hombre!"

"It's me—Sid!"

"You? Why, damn you—!" Brasada broke off. The boy was hurt, hanging onto a saddle-less horse, and the horse was one of the buckboard team. Brasada reined up alongside and caught hold of him. "What's wrong?"

Sid tried to straighten up. One side of his face was darkly splotched. "Four o' those jiggers—same ones who had our cows. They caught us. One of 'em had a busted shoulder. They were crazy wild." He steadied himself on Brasada's arm. "They rode right at us, shooting! That's all I know."

"How'd you get here? Think! Think hard, kid!"

"I don't know. I guess I got on this horse, after they shot me and left me. I remember—yeah—I went looking for you at that camp. You were gone, and I followed the cattle tracks."

"Where's Jean?"

"I don't know! Wait a minute, let me think." Sid swayed giddily, and swore a man-sized oath. "When I came to, the buckboard was a wreck. I'd tried to outrun 'em, and they shot one of the team. Jean—they took her, I guess. She was gone! They were crazy, I tell you! Crazy!"

"So?" Brasada's face, hard even in repose, was bleak. "Crazy, hell! They lost out on the cattle, so when they saw a chance to make good they took it! They'll take her to Thurlow, an' he'll use her to bait your dad into a gun trap—an' hell knows where she'll end up after that! Thurlow's a big man, an' the law strikes me as being pretty puny around Crimway. Who's to stop him?"

"Me!" said Sid.

"The hell you say!" growled Brasada, and dug in his heels and took off. He clean forgot about the pot of gold at the Mexican end of the rainbow, and when he did happen to think of the cattle he remembered them as something that had seemed vaguely important at the time, but which no longer amounted to a damn.

HE RODE into Crimway at a walk, searching his mind for ways and means, and finding nothing more promising than a lone-ace chance against a full house. In all the welter of his thoughts only the purpose stood clear. He had promised to get Jean and Sid to safety, and he had failed.

There was no new start for him, and never would be. Life had to be accepted and paid for as it came dealt out, and whatever use was made of it, the account had to be settled. The wild years had been flung to waste, and here in this town, where they had begun they would finish.

Moonlight softened the raw outlines of the false fronts, and at this late hour even Hogan's Bar was closed, but the lights still burned in the Lucky Draw and there was noise and movement behind the windows. Brasada tied the sorrel to the corral fence behind the livery stable, yanked his hat brim down, and cruised on around into the street. When he got abreast of the hay and grain store, he became aware that the Lucky Draw wasn't the only place that was still awake. In the sheriff's office, set back from the street, there was also a light, and the sound of talk.

Through the broken window he saw

Joley, slumped lazily as usual in the swivel chair, hands clasped over his stomach. Facing him across the desk, his big diamond flashing in the yellow glare of the lamp, stood Turck Thurlow. Two other men lounged inside the open doorway. They were the same armed and watchful-eyed pair who had sat with Thurlow in the Lucky Draw, and their sinisterly silent presence was evidently a worry to the sheriff, for he kept glancing past Thurlow at them.

Thurlow was saying with chill force, not bothering to lower his voice, "Don't make Longwill's mistake, Joley—he didn't last long! You can last only as long as it suits me. Now open up and turn that girl loose, and maybe I'll overlook your damned impudence in taking her away from my men!"

Joley shifted uneasily and the chair creaked. Sweat glistened on his pudgy face. He said placatingly, "Be reasonable, will you? You're the mayor, sure. But I'm sheriff. Jean McGrath was implicated in the escape of an arrested prisoner, and I'm holding her in temporary custody pending lawful disposal of her case. I was acting within the bounds of duty when I took her away from those four, even at the point of my shotgun! I can't let you take her, Thurlow!"

"Why, you—!" Thurlow, jowls quivering in rage, leaned over the desk and raised a fist as if to strike the heavy face. Joley stared up at him with round, unwinking eyes, and Thurlow lowered his arm and snapped, "Strawn! Maxon! Take over!" He stalked to the door and kept his back turned.

Strawn, a big yellow-haired man who resembled more a prosperous Mormon farmer than a professional killer, nodded and smiled faintly. He slid his gun out, flipped it over in his hand, and held it by the barrel to use as a club. Sedate and matter-of-fact, he paced toward Joley. Maxon, a young gunman with consciously elegant manners and a piping voice, laughed and said, "Here goes another sheriff!"

Joley got up out of his chair and walked toward the rear, fishing a key from his pants pocket. "All right, Thurlow, I guess you win," he observed, and fitted the key into a cell lock.

Thurlow turned back from the doorway to watch him, and caught Maxon's eye and nodded curtly. Maxon uttered his light little laugh again and strolled after the sheriff.

Brasada's tread was soft as he quit the corner and made for Thurlow, but behind him on the far side of the street the spring hinges of the Lucky Draw swing doors rasped and some men clumped out onto the boardwalk. The sound caused Thurlaw to look around. Lamplight from the saloon made a dark silhouette of Brasada and put his face in shadow, yet Thurlow stepped swiftly backward, pricked to wary alertness, and demanded, "Who's that?"

The men from the saloon heard, paused, and one of them called across, "It's all right, we're just goin' for—" and stopped. He called in a different tone to Brasada, "Hey, hombre, he means you! Who the hell are you?"

Brasada didn't turn, didn't reply. Caught short between hirelings and master, he took a running lunge at Thurlow. All value of the soft prowl was wiped out, and caution with it. Hell had a floating population of those who failed to hit first and hardest.

CHAPTER FOUR

Last of the Gun Hung Crew

THURLOW jumped twice, first into the office with an instinctive urge to take cover, then out through the broken window.

Bursting into the office, Brasada glimpsed Thurlow's coat-tails vanishing

through the window, and he sprang out again. He knew that Strawn had spun around with his gun jutting out and the hammer thumbed back, but Thurlow was sprinting to the street and in a couple of steps would be safe around the corner of the emporium. With two targets and time only for one of them, Brasada let Strawn finish his shot, and he slammed a bullet after Thurlow.

The crack of the Lemat ripped out the first of a fast threesome blast that flung waves of sound into the space between the two wooden store buildings, and put into a moment's startled halt upon the Lucky Draw group. Brasada knew he was hit. Strawn had got him. He knew, too, that his own shot at Thurlow hadn't gone astray. The source of the third shot he didn't know, nor its target; it was loudest of the three and was fired inside the sheriff's office.

Thurlow stumbled. It was somehow queer to see that somberly dignified figure bump drunkenly into the wall of the emporium, sprawl on its hands and knees, and go crawling around the corner. The men over at the Lucky Draw, and others spilling noisily out, stared unbelievingly as if they had thought he possessed some kind of special immunity above that of common men. He called across to them thickly, "Get him! Get that—!"

Brasada turned, swaying, and caught a heel on the sheriff's doorstep and fell inside. Strawn's gun thudded at him, and he rolled over, dully marvelling that this time Strawn had missed, until he saw the reason. The cell door was wide open, and Maxon lay half in and half out of the cell. Sheriff Joley, one muzzle of his shotgun still trickling smoke, was stepping over the body, but Jean had jumped out ahead of him and clamped both her small hands on Strawn's gun-arm. The big, yellow-haired killer swung her around like a bull tossing off a terrier.

Doors banged along the aroused street, and the boardwalk was a sounding drum under the thumping of running feet. The lights winked out in the Lucky Draw, and there was the confused noise of shouts, queries, cursing, and men charging across the street. A voice yelled, "It's the Brasada hombre!"

Brasada steadied the gold-mounted gun with both hands, and fired. Joley fired his shotgun at the same time and blew the

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lamp out, but after an instant a heavy body hit the floor and Joley said in the darkness, "You got him, Brasada! Hold off that mob till I get my scattergun loaded."

"Get me Strawn's gun. This thing's empty."

He found Jean beside him, pushing a gun and shell belt to him. He got the gun into his hand, but by that time the shotgun flared a booming streak out through the window and he heard Joley bellowing after it, promising to put a load of buckshot into everybody in the name of the law if they didn't quit monkeying around his office.

The noises outside subsided sullenly. Joley's lowered voice reached Brasada, a querulous note in it. "Durn you, Brasada, you nearly let me get killed tonight! I don't like it to come that close! I like to just sit round here an' use my head, watching for what turns up an' playing one against the other. That's how I get things done, an' when you turned up I knew there'd be something doing! Turck Thurlow was too big for me to handle—I knew that, from what happened to Longwill! Thurlow gunned him. Everybody knows it, but nobody says so. Thurlow is too big."

"He was!" Brasada corrected. "I think I got him."

"Yeah?" Joley sounded almost happy. "Well, as he said himself—there are times when we have to use illegal methods to get justice! I do it occasionally. It's a tough country. Thurlow down, eh? An' Labaucher, Tad Toole, Strawn, Maxon. . . . H'm! You're a sharp knife to conjure with, but I sure used my head when I played you against 'em, Mr. Brasada Brad Magoffin! That's your name, isn't it? Anyhow, they say that was the name of Longwill's partner, so—"

"Magoffin!" exclaimed Jean. "You?"

Brasada didn't answer. He felt dead tired and very shaky. The matter of the Bar T bill of sale seemed as trifling now as a mislaid dollar. He said, "Sid was still in fair enough shape to make it to home, when I left him. I reckon he an' your dad will be coming in to see about you, if they're able. I hope they can shoot!"

Joley overheard. "Andy McGrath is no better'n I am with a six gun," he stated. "But he can write his name with a rifle. The boy ain't bad, either. If they get here, an' if we can hold the lid on till morning, I can handle this town from then on. That is, if enough good citizens will back me up."

"Too many ifs!" muttered Brasada.

"Oh, I don't know," Joley demurred. "Why, if—h'm, maybe you're half right, at that!" The big rabbit-eared hammers of his shotgun clicked to full cock. "Here they come!"

BRASADA, lying inside the doorway, peered out, saw the murky figures come slipping along the walls, and he cut loose with Strawn's gun. It was a heavy Dragoon gun with an extra long barrel, but the roar of it was drowned out when the shotgun blared. By accident or design or the grace of a too fine-set trigger, Joley fired both barrels at once and nearly got kicked into his favorite sitting position. Even from behind, the double overcharges of exploded powder made an awesome racket and flame. What the effect was on those in front could only be guessed. From the line of the gun-flash Brasada suspected that the sheriff had missed everything but the moon; but he'd given them something to think about.

A rifle whammed, and then another. The reports came from somewhere up above, alternating steadily. Bullets screamed and ricocheted along the street, and Joley sang out, "Andy McGrath an' the boy, up on the roofs somewhere! I *told* you I got things done, one way or other!"

From what he could see and hear of the

rapidly emptying street, Brasada was about ready to take his word for it. Men were hunting up horses and getting out of Crimway; men who were quickest to see that the Thurlow payroll was closed. And this, too, followed a familiar pattern. Fighters for profit couldn't afford loyalty to less than a living paymaster. Others would be gone before morning. There would be some, as usual, who would examine and whitewash their records, and protest to high heaven that they'd always been against Thurlow.

It needed no prophetic sight to foresee the coming order in this town. It would be a subdued and chastened town, respectful of law, and Joley would be able to handle it nicely while dozing in his chair, backed by good citizens. The only part Brasada couldn't see was a place for himself in it.

"Hey, where you going?" Joley called to him.

"Got to see 'bout my horse," Brasada answered, and he was at the rear door when he said it and he got out as fast as he could without falling.

He steered a careful course around to the livery corral, and swore. His sorrel was gone. Laboriously, he opened the corral gate and went in. Five horses eyed him suspiciously, cocked their ears at him, and snorted nervous defiance when he took the catching rope off the snubbing post. As soon as he shook out the loop, they started streaking around the corral in a boil of dust. He turned round and round the snubbing post, trying to follow them.

He was still going around, staggering, when somebody bobbed up beside him and demanded, "What d'you think you're trying to do?"

He looked down dizzily and saw it was Jean, and he mumbled that he thought he was trying to catch a horse. She asked fiercely, but with a sharp catch in her voice, "You going somewhere? Darn all this dust. Dust always makes me choke."

He thought he was going somewhere, not sure where, until he saw a fat figure with a shotgun coming into the corral. "Hey, Andy! Sid!" Joley shouted. "Gim-me a hand with this feller!"

So. Already Joley could command help and backing when he wanted it. Brasada leaned heavily against the snubbing post and closed his eyes. In a little while he was aware that they were steadying him, helping him out of the corral, and he heard Andrew McGrath say, "So you're Magoffin! I know that name."

BRASADA nodded. "Yeah. Forget it." They were taking him back around to the jail. "That bill of sale—it's okay. Forget it, McGrath."

"Why should I?" McGrath sounded like an indignant deacon accused of pawning the church plate. His burr got thistley. "Young man, it's high time ye took up yer responsibilities an' relieved me o' my bur-rr-den! Skallyhootin' around while others shoulder yer tr-rroubles! If I hadn't given my solemn wor-rrd—"

"Let me put him right, Dad," Jean broke in gently. "Maybe he's been listening to the wrong people. After all, he can't be very smart, or he wouldn't have let Mr. Joley steer him into doing his job for him!"

"Now, Jean—!" protested the sheriff.

"Hush! Look here, Brad Magoffin, don't you get my dad down on you, or you'll rue it! He promised Britt Longwill that he'd try to hold onto the ranch for a man named Magoffin who would show up some day. He has done it, and you've finally showed up, and that's that. See? As for the bill of sale, it doesn't amount to anything except that it did enable Dad to show legal ownership and keep hold of the place. Britt thought of that, but he only had time to sign a blank page before he died. Dad filled it in next day."

(Continued on page 127)

HENRY'S RED-EYED MONSTER

By RICHARD BRISTER

Ed's big fist gouged into the Doc's middle with a sickening thud.

Old Hank Dexter became a fugitive from his own particular brand of forty-rod when his lovely young daughter came to town—but found he had to get skunk-drunk in a strange and desperate try to keep a skunk from becoming his son-in-law.

NEARLY everybody in town was willing to admit that Henry Dexter had a razor-sharp eye for sizing up people. Henry was a great hand for lollygagging on the porch of the Steen Hotel, along with three or four cronies, and making snap judgments of strangers as they rode into Steen City.

"Now there's a feller," Henry might say, "that don't stack up very high, fer my money. Notice his slouchy way of sittin' his horse. Them spur marks on the

poor critter's flanks shows the man's got a long streak of cruelty in him. An' his clothes is plain filthy."

"Why," young Doc Potter would say, smiling over his pipe toward Henry, "I s'pose you're right about that man, Henry. Generally are. But speakin' of filthy clothes, Henry, ain't it some time since that shirt of yours saw the inside of a washtub?"

"Sure it is, Doc. What about it?"

"Why, nothin', I guess, Henry." And Doc would let that slow grin of his drift around toward the others on the hotel porch. "Just seems kind of odd, you settin' yourself up to pass judgment on folks."

Henry could understand that attitude, easily enough. For a fact, he didn't stack up for much here in Steen City. Long hours at the bar and at the poker tables down at the Double Dollar had etched deep lines into his thin, red face, though he wasn't yet forty. Right this minute, he ought to be back of the counter down at his gunsmith shop. He could fix any kind of a firearm that ever was made. And the fact that he was lollygagging up here on the hotel porch when he ought to be tending store gave him a guilty feeling.

Doc Porter was right. He *was* a fine one to be calling the turn on others.

But, of course, he didn't do it in a spirit of vindictiveness. Judging character was just sort of a game with him. One of his main pleasures. Aside from filling his comfortable paunch with the product of Ma Smiley's years of experience in restaurant cooking. And having a few snorts with the boys at the Dollar. And smoking up a few loads of fine-cut burley. And taking a hand at stud.

"Well, now, Doc," Henry said mildly, "mebbe I ain't just the model citizen of this town. Guess I ain't got any right judgin' folks, bein' so sorty useless and lazy my ownself." He laughed softly. "On the other hand, I don't reckon I'd have such a knack fer sizin' up weaknesses in the other feller if I didn't have plenty of my own."

"Takes a thief to catch a thief, hey, Henry?" said Doc Porter.

Doc was a handsome young rascal, barely thirty. He'd finished his interneship at a hospital back east in Baltimore, and then wisely sought a young, but fast-growing western town in which to hang up his shingle. The only doctor for forty miles around, he was doing a land-office business. Sudden success had made the young fellow almost unbearably self-confident.

"Takes the town ne'er-do-well to spot the same strain in others. Eh, Henry?"

"Why, you cocky young rooster!" exploded Henry. "What makes you think you can talk to me that way and get away with it? I got a good mind to bust you."

It was more froth than solid substance. Doc just chuckled comfortably behind his black pipe and said, "Cool down, Henry. Come down to the Dollar and I'll set you up for a couple. No call to get yourself up in a lather. I didn't mean anything."

"We-e-ll," Henry said slowly. "All right, since you put it that way."

HE DIDN'T like being bought off so cheaply. The thing was: the hot sun out there on the porch had parched him out, badly. And, for the moment, until he could collect from some men who owed him for repair work on their sixguns, Henry's pockets were discouragingly empty.

"You're all right, Doc," Henry said, in the faintly ingratiating tone of a man well on his way to becoming a professional drink cadger. He licked his cracked lips, swallowing drily. "Yep, I'll have one or two with you."

He had finished one and was on the point of lifting number two to his lips when Harley Dangerfield came briskly into the Dollar and nodded toward him.

"You're wanted down to the railroad depot, Henry. Uncle Dan says to hustle. It's somethin' important."

Henry frowned. He sluiced the jigger of redeye before him down his throat quickly, thanked Doc for it, and swung through the batwings. A hundred yards from the depot, he saw Uncle Dan Tobbey coming swiftly up the board walk to meet him.

Henry felt his heart thump hard. Uncle Dan was the railroad agent. Something real important *must* be in the air, to make him leave his office and telegraph buzzer.

"What is it, Dan?" Henry greeted him anxiously.

The whiskered old man came close to him, sniffing. "Daggone it all, Henry. Where you bin? Sloshin' up rotgut booze in the Dollar ag'in, 'stead of tendin' to your gunsmithin'?"

"What if I have?" Henry said sharply.

Uncle Dan Tobbey was walking around him in a sad-faced tour of inspection. He tugged at his white beard, scowling. "It won't do," he said. "You'll have to skedaddle home and git yourself cleaned up, 'fore I'd have the nerve to interduce you to sech a sweet young thing as her sure-enough daddy. She'll jest have to wait, that's all."

"Daddy!" gasped Henry. "Listen, you cantankerous old billygoat, are you tryin' to tell me my daughter's in town?"

The old man nodded gravely. He waved a gnarled hand toward the ramshackle station. "Sittin' right over there on a bench in the station, Henry. Purtiest thing these old eyes ever seed. Shame on you, Henry, fer never admittin' you had a daughter."

"But—but what's Nancy doin' here?" Henry gulped weakly. "It's—Lord—it's eleven years. Last time I saw her and her mother, Nancy wasn't past six. You—you say she's turned out pretty, Dan?"

"Purty enough t' drive a man crazy," the old man said, and grinned toothily. "Don't favor you none, Henry. Reckon her ma must of bin a real looker."

"There—there's nobody with her?"

"Sure ain't. All alone, she is, an' lookin' so sorty helpless it's breakin' my heart, Henry. Uh—judgin' from the sad look in her eyes, I'd guess her mother's passed on, Henry, leavin' her with no choice but to turn to her daddy. You are her real daddy, ain't you?"

"Of course," Henry said absently. His head was still spinning. The suddenness of this thing had knocked him off his emotional balance.

"Hope I ain't shocked you none," said Uncle Dan, "by suggestin' that her ma's passed on, Henry. Reckon if you'd of been real fond of that woman, you'd of stayed with her."

HENRY'S mouth twisted. Fond, he was thinking. *Fond!* Of Edith? His mind swung back over the years, recalling the long-ago days back in Philadelphia, when he had tried so desperately hard to make a go of his marriage with Edith.

He'd been working in a gun factory, making better-than-average wages. But Edith had been accustomed to more luxuries than he was able to provide, and her constantly carping tongue had reminded Henry of that fact day and night.

There was no pleasure for him at home, except basking in young Nancy's presence. Henry had begun to spend some time, after work, in a saloon near the shop. One night he went home to an empty house. Edith had taken Nancy home to her folks.

Henry had fought the thing through the courts, wanting desperately to keep Nancy. But Edith's father had had money and power. His attorneys convinced the court that Henry's drinking made an unfit father of him.

So Edith had kept Nancy, and had won a divorce, and shortly thereafter, had re-

married. Henry had come West, to try to forget the whole ugly business and rebuild his life from scratch. But he had not been able to forget. The feeling persisted in him that the better part of his life—at least, what *should* have been the better part—lay already behind him. He didn't care any more. That was it. He drifted from day to day with an attitude of not caring, a man devoid of ambition, a man whose way of life was slowly but surely destroying all sense of pride within him.

"No," he told Uncle Dan now, "I wasn't real fond of that woman." His eyes narrowed. "Nobody was fond of that woman, Dan. Not for long."

The old man glanced anxiously at him. "Henry, you got to snap out of it now. That purty young gal's settin' inside that station, bitin' her lip to keep from cryin', scairt half out of her wits to be in sich a strange place, and no doubt wonderin' what she'll say when she first sets eyes on her pappy, after all these years. Henry, you look a mess."

"Guess I do," Henry said limply. "Dan, what'll I do?"

"You hustle on home," the bewhiskered station agent said firmly, "an' clean yourself up some. Git a shave, an' comb your hair, and put some clean clothes on, if you've got any. I'll cook up some yarn to keep the gal happy whilst you're fixin' up. Git along now, Henry."

"All right, Dan." Henry turned away.

"And mind you gargle with somethin' strong," the old man snapped at him. "That breath of yours purt' near knocked me over. You're goin' to have to change your ways somethin' drastic, Henry, in case you ain't realized it yet."

"I have," Henry said huskily, and went down the broad walk at a half-jog, wondering how in the world he could clean up the place in a few short minutes, so he wouldn't have to feel ashamed when he led Nancy into it. His high heels hit the planks faster, and panic grew in him.

Still, he was smiling.

An hour later, scrubbed till his red face shone like an apple, shaved and with his iron-gray hair neatly combed, and squirming within his "boiled" collar, Henry timidly entered the waiting room at the depot.

He stood awkwardly with his hat in his hands, staring awestruck at the trim young lady in the fashionable, eastern-style clothes who sat on the bench at one end of the room. The girl, with her reddish hair, her pale-as-watered-milk skin, and soft, rounded figure, was so breathtakingly beautiful that Henry could hardly believe she was really his daughter and Edith's.

He saw that the young bloods of Steen City had not wasted time this past hour. The girl was half-surrounded by young men of the town, embarrassedly trying to fend them off without seeming rude and unfriendly.

"Now shoo, you 'uns!" whiskered Uncle Dan Tobbey was growling at the young blades. "Where's yer manners? Cain't you see the young lady ain't in no mood t' talk with you? Go on, now. That means you, Ed Prentice. You too, Doc."

The young men of Steen City had not seen an eligible young girl in some months. They gave ground grudgingly. Ed Prentice, the tall, friendly faced local hardwareman, and young Doc Porter, refused to let old Uncle Dan shoo them away from Henry's daughter.

Henry heard young Doc saying, "I can't understand that Henry, not telling *me* he had a daughter. I'm one of his very best friends here in Steen City, Miss Dexter. Why, only an hour ago—"

"That'll do, Doc," Henry said quickly, as he walked toward them. He shot a quick look at Uncle Dan. The old man nodded almost imperceptibly at him, his rheumy eyes approving the change in Henry's appearance.

"This is your daddy, Miss Nancy," he said gravely.

HENRY stood there, feeling somewhat awkward and foolish as the girl's blue eyes inspected him briefly. She stood up slowly, came timidly toward him, then suddenly said, "Oh, Daddy!" and reached forward to kiss him.

It must have been a trying time for her, while she waited for him, reasoned Henry. And likely the time before that hadn't been easy either. He could sense she was losing all control. He lost his awkwardness as she crumbled in his arms and he hugged her against him.

"There now, honey," he purred. "Everything's going to be all right."

Over the girl's sobbing shoulder he saw Ed Prentice and young Doc Porter staring at him with envy. Doc wore a somewhat foolish look of surprise on his pinched face.

"Sufferin' catfish, Henry," he gasped, staring at Henry's neat raiment, "what a change has come over you, in the last hour."

Henry scowled at him. "Fer a professional man, Doc," he said, pointedly dropping his eyes toward the girl, "you kin sure say the wrong thing at the right time. Why don't you skedaddle now, and leave me and Nancy alone?"

"I was hoping," said Doc in a brittle voice, "that you'd introduce me, Henry."

"All in good time," Henry said. "The girl's tired. Come along now, honey. We'll go up to the house, and you can sort of rest up from your trip. This here all your luggage?"

He nodded toward two big traveling bags. The girl's pretty head bobbed in silent assent.

"It just happens," Doc Porter said pointedly, "that I've got my rig waiting outside, Henry. I was kind of hopin' you'd let me haul you and the girl out to your place?"

Henry frowned. Harley Dangerfield's public rig was always handy for those who had two bits to pay for the ride. At the moment, Henry didn't have a red cent, and he hated the idea of asking Harley to wait for his money in front of Nancy. Henry wanted her to think well of her daddy, right from the start.

On the other hand, he prided himself on his ability to judge people, and he long ago had decided that young Doc Porter's self-confident manner covered a lot of faults that sooner or later would come out in the wash. Henry didn't cotton to the idea of Doc sparking his daughter, not for a minute.

Doc's offering him the use of his rig kind of put Henry over a berrel.

"Just *happened* to have your rig ready and waitin', eh, Doc?" Henry said, letting the younger man see he wasn't fooled by that statement. "Right kind of you to offer, but I reckon Nancy and me'll do all right with Harley. Thing is, you may get an emergency call from some patient any time at all, Doc."

"Nonsense," Doc gritted.

"Look, Mr. Dexter," big Ed Prentice cut in suddenly. "My rig's outside too. I'd sure admire to give you and your daughter a ride home, if you'd be so minded. Don't reckon the store'll run off without me."

"Why, that's true enough, Ed," Henry said warmly. He liked big Ed Prentice. Ed wasn't a brash, talkative pusher like Doc was. But he was doing all right in his quiet, unspectacular way, building himself up a nice steady trade at the hardware store. Everyone in town seemed to like him. And it was nice and thoughtful of Ed, Henry decided, to address him as "Mr. Dexter" today, in front of Nancy, instead of calling him plain "Henry," as Doc had.

"It's kind of you, Ed," Henry nodded. "We'll be glad to ride with you."

ED PRENTICE'S freckled face split in a grin that stretched almost to his ears. He grabbed Nancy's traveling bags

and walked outside with them. The girl followed slowly. Henry took a step with her, but young Doc Porter grabbed him by the sleeve and gritted angrily at him:

"What kind of a deal are you pullin' here, Henry? You got a mighty short memory, if you want my opinion."

"Have I? said Henry. "How so?"

"I just stood you two drinks in the Dollar an hour ago, in case you're forgettin'."

"What about it?"

"What about it! Here you're givin' Ed the inside of the track with your girl, after I just—"

"Are you suggestin'," Henry snapped back bluntly, "that a dollar's worth of rotgut booze entitles you to make calf eyes at my Nancy? You'll get your dollar back, Doc, and soon, if that's how you figger."

"I never said—"

"It's all right, Doc. Look, I'm in a hurry."

Doc's fingers tightened on his sleeve. "Can I come up tonight and kind of get get acquainted with Nancy?"

"We'll see. Let go of me, Doc. I got to run."

"You can give me a better answer than that," Doc said. "How about it, tonight?"

"You hear me say to let go of my arm, Doc?"

Doc pulled his hand away slowly. His eyes widened as he read the ugly expression in Henry's normally pleasant face. "What's got into you, all of a sudden?"

"Just don't crowd me none, Doc," Henry said, and walked out to join Ed Prentice and the girl on Ed's fine rig with the spanking pair of matched bays.

Ed Prentice had sense. He delivered them at the house, lugged Nancy's bags inside, mumbled something about being happy to have made her acquaintance, and turned away. He knew Henry and the girl wanted to be alone for the time being.

Henry walked him to the door and whispered, "Thanks, Ed. Drop around sometime, why don't you?"

The hardwareman smiled. "That's kind of you, Henry. I'll do that, with pleasure."

Henry watched him down the street, then turned inside where the girl waited. "I'm afraid I can't offer you much of a home compared with what you've been used to back east," he said bleakly, staring around the bare little room with its pot-bellied stove, its pine-plank walls, its homemade chairs and table. "You see, I've been batching it since your mother and I parted ways, Nancy, and when a man lives alone, he's like to live simply. How is your mother, by the way? You here for good, or for just a short visit?"

"F-for good, Daddy. If it's all r-right, I mean." Her lower lip trembled. "Mother is d-dead. She caught pneumonia and—it was awfully sudden."

"Your step-father?"

"He's been gone for ages. He disappeared five years ago, Daddy. Just went off to work one morning and never came back."

Henry felt a thin thrust of sympathy for the man, though he never had seen him. Somebody else, apparently, had been unable to stand living with Edith.

"Mother had to go to work," Nancy was saying.

"But—her father was a rich man, girl."

"He lost all his money years ago in the stock market, Daddy. He's gone now, and so is Grandmother. I—I guess you and I are all the family each other has left." Her blue eyes flickered at him. "I—I would have warned you I was coming, only there wasn't time for a letter to reach you, and telegrams cost so much money."

"That's all right, honey. The main thing is you got here."

"If—if my being here is going to—to cost you too much, Daddy—I mean—" her pretty face turned red "—if you're not doing too well. . . ."

"Course I'm doing well," Henry blustered. He was thinking how hard it must be for the poor girl, coming alone all the way out here from Philadelphia, having just seen her mother buried. She was only seventeen, it was a strange, hard-looking land to her young eyes, and it was extremely important now to instill a sense of security in her.

"You don't want to judge by the looks of this place," he said recklessly. "Houses are apt to be kind of rough out here, Nancy, as compared with back East. Course I'm doing well. Got one of the best little businesses here in Steen City."

HE SAW the worried frown dissolve away from the pretty rosebud mouth, and told himself he had lied to her in a good cause. Maybe the Lord would forgive him that whopper.

Apparently a Divine Providence was working on his side, for the next morning when he went downtown to open his little gunsmith shop, he found fully two dozen customers waiting. Big Ed Prentice stood at the forefront of the group, wearing a long, slow smile as usual.

"What's all this about, Ed?" Henry asked him.

"Hope you won't take this wrong, Henry," the young hardwareman said. "Me and the boys figgered maybe you wasn't too flush, and what with Nancy droppin' down on you unexpected, you'll be wantin' to fix things up at your house, more'n likely. Nancy'll probably be wantin' curtains and suchlike feminine fixings, and all those things run into money."

"You're right so far," Henry said.

"So me and the boys have dug up some old guns that need fixing, Henry, and we're prepared to leave a deposit to kind of carry you over till you get the work out."

"Oh, now, that wasn't necessary," Henry said, embarrassed, and yet pleased more than he knew how to say. "I'll bet this was your idea, Ed. Confess now."

"Well, I talked it up some at the start, but now the whole town's behind it, Henry. I—uh—I don't know just the best way to say this, Henry, but if you was to go off the booze, all of a sudden, I reckon this town'd try hard to keep Nancy from hearin' how you used to go for the bottle."

Henry wasn't the least bit put out. "Why, you couldn't've chose those words any better," he grinned at young Ed. "Fact is, I'd already promised myself to turn a new leaf, fellas. Nancy's at a right impressionable age. I wasn't fixing to stagger home some night from drinkin' and card-playin' at the Dollar and hurt my poor Nancy's feelings."

"Thought you'd see it that way," Ed Prentice said.

"You're a right fine young man," Henry said sincerely.

His liking for the young hardwareman grew stronger later that day, when Nancy visited him down at the shop. Her blue eyes widened at sight of the guns stacked up on Henry's work counter.

"My," she said, "do you have to fix all those, Daddy?"

"I keep pretty busy," Henry said proudly.

And in the monentary glow of the moment, he almost could forget the nagging thirst that was working away at the inside of his mouth. Swearing off the bottle, he saw, wasn't going to be exactly a cinch. He hadn't realized the stuff had got such a grip on him.

He looked at Nancy. She was a lovely young thing, fresh and pretty and clean as a spring morning. He caught himself smiling fondly, and realized with a jolt that he'd clean forgotten the bottle, while he looked at her.

A month later, he'd even lost a good part of the old whisky craving. He'd been doing good work in the shop, winning

back all the old customers who'd deserted him when he'd started drinking so hard and neglecting the shop. He was making a small mint of money, and Nancy was turning the house into a real attractive home, though, girl-like, she'd leaned toward the frilly side just a little.

Henry knew why. Young men came calling by the dozens, and Nancy was human enough to want them to see her in a proper setting. At seventeen, a girl was ready to be thinking of marriage and a home of her own, in this frontier country. Nancy's fancy seemed to settle down hardest on Ed Prentice and young Doc Porter.

"I knew the minute I laid eyes on you down in the depot," Henry told her somewhat ruefully. "I knew I'd never keep you for long, girl. Pretty thing like you's bound to get hitched in a hurry, in this part of the country."

"Well goodness, Daddy, I'm not in any great hurry." She was blushing, the high color of her cheeks belying the words.

"Ed's all right," Henry said slowly. "But what a smart girl like you can see in Doc Porter's beyond me."

"Why, he's the handsomest man in Steen City, Daddy. He has a fine medical practice. And he's not backward and shy, like Ed is."

"Now don't you go underrating Ed Prentice, just because he's no blowhard like Doc is."

"Don't you like Doc at all, Daddy?"

"I've always prided myself on bein' a judge of character, honey. I can understand how Doc could *look* best, in your eyes. He's good-lookin', where Ed's just likeable-lookin'. Doc makes more money, right at the moment, though I'd bet Ed'll pass him later on. Not that that's the big thing in choosin' a husband. Thing about Doc is, he's all show. There's no real starch in him, honey."

"I see," she said.

She was staring at him so strangely that he felt an uncomfortable feeling inside. He'd been a fool, he knew then. In talking Doc down, he'd actually built Doc up in her eyes. Women were a contankerous lot, most of them. He should have criticized Ed and praised Doc to the skies, he now realized.

ONE morning, the arrogant young medico dropped in on him unexpectedly at the shop.

"Seems like that girl's worked a real miracle in you, Henry," Doc Porter suggested.

Henry laid the Peacemaker Colt and the sear pin he'd been trying to insert on his bench and looked up at Doc.

"Miracle?" he said. "How?"

"Why, hell, Henry," Doc laughed. "Look at you. Clean-shaven, and your hair's been cut. You're wearin' decent clothes, and your eyes're just as clear as a daisy. Damn me if I think you've had so much as one drink since that girl got here."

"Haven't," said Henry. "What about it?"

"Why, nothin', 'cept that's the miracle I'm talkin' about. A month ago, you were the town ne'er-do-well—"

"I don't like that word, Doc. S'pose in the future you try to avoid it."

"Why, you even got dignity," Doc chuckled. "Doggone me if I don't think you mean business, Henry. You're really reformin' for good." His eyes gleamed shrewdly toward Henry. "Come on over to the Dollar and I'll stand you to a couple, Henry."

"No thanks, Doc," Henry said. "Save your money. I'm off the stuff, like you say. I'm buildin' myself up a nice cozy trade here in the shop, and Nancy's proud of me. I'm goin' to keep her that way."

"Good," Doc said. "That's all I wanted to hear you say, Henry. I'll admit this thing's had me worried."

"What?"

"Why, marryin' Nancy. After all, a man in my shoes, with his whole life before him, has got to consider all angles. A doctor's got to keep up a certain amount of 'face' in his town, if he ever means to go very far. I can't afford havin' the town ne'er—havin' a heavy-drinkin' man for a father-in-law, Henry."

Henry stared at the young fellow, blank-faced. The shock of Doc Porter's words had left him tongue-tied till the younger man finished.

"Why, you conceited young pup!" he suddenly snorted. "Got to keep up 'face,' have you? Can't have a drinkin' man for a father-in-law, hey? Jest what in Sam Hill give you to think Nancy'd have you? You ain't proposed to her yet, have you?"

"No," Doc smiled blandly in the face of Henry's wrath. "I wanted to be sure about you first. But I've got a feelin' she won't turn me down. A man can generally read the signs and figure how he stands with a girl, if he keeps his eyes open."

"Git out of here!" Henry suddenly exploded. "Go on now, you arrogant young devil."

"Calm down," Doc said.

Henry picked up the Colt Peacemaker from the counter and lifted it overhead, marching around from behind the counter at Doc.

"You hear me tell you to make tracks, Doc? Move, now!"

"Listen, you crazy old—"

Henry swung the gun in a threatening arc.

"Last chance, Doc."

Doc backed through the door, his eyes narrowed, holding his hands up in front of him.

"You're not scaring me off by staging a scene like this, Henry. I've made up my mind to marry that girl of yours and you'll never stop me."

Henry felt a sinking sensation under his belt.

"Nancy's a sensible girl. I reckon she'll listen to whatever I choose to tell her."

"We'll see," Doc said.

"Where you goin'?" Henry called.

"I'm goin' to see Nancy, and put the question up to her," Doc called back, and plunged recklessly up the board walk.

HENRY sat hunched on the work stool in front of his counter for fully five minutes, not moving a muscle as he considered this new situation.

Nancy, at seventeen, was too young and impressionable to see young Doc Porter for the scalawag he really was. The girl would say "Yes" to a proposal of marriage from Doc. Henry felt both disgusted and helpless, knowing that Doc held the ace cards in this deal, that unless Henry chose to alienate the girl by simply refusing to let her marry Doc, he could not possibly prevent the disaster.

Ed Prentice, now, was worth a dozen of Doc's kind, if only Nancy could see it. But young folks were attracted more by froth than by substance.

Nancy did seem genuinely fond of Ed. But her feeling for Doc was closer to infatuation, Henry knew glumly. Apparently, this was a situation that left a man completely helpless, without weapons to fight the uneven battle. There simply wasn't any way to make Nancy see Doc in his true colors.

Or—or *was* there? He suddenly straightened there in front of the bench, and a wide smile bent his lips at the corners.

He locked up the shop and walked purposefully across the wide street toward the beckoning batwings of the Double Dollar.

A half-hour—and four shots of rotgut booze—later, Henry staggered into Ed Prentice' hardware store down the street. Ed glanced up from an account book and wagged his big head like an unhappy St. Bernard.

"Doggone you if you ain't fell off the

wagon, Henry. And we were all so proud of you."

"Jus' had me a few," Henry said thickly. "Hit me hard, 'cause I'm out of practice. Thought maybe you'd help me home, Ed."

"You figure you ought to *go* home, Henry, in your condition?"

"'S where I b'long, Ed. Reckon Nancy's got to know th' truth some time, don' she?"

"All right," Ed Prentice said glumly. "Seems kind of a shame though. This here will probably give her a bad shock. She ain't likely to think too highly of you after this, Henry."

"That ain' th' importan' thing," Henry said, his voice dripping with mawkish sentiment. "Come on."

Ten minutes later, he was walking up the lane toward the house, while Ed gripped his arm in a vice grip, and gritted, "Get hold of yourself now, Henry. We'll try claimin' you're sick, and mebbe we can fool her."

Just then, Henry saw Nancy come out onto the porch, followed by bland young Doc Porter. Henry pulled away from Ed roughly.

"Don' wanna fool 'er," he said. "I'm drunk, thash all. Drunk's a hoot owl. Hi, Doc. 'Lo, honey."

Doc Porter's superior young eyes stared bitterly at him. "So you couldn't quite make it, hey, Henry? First little crisis in your life knocked you off the wagon."

Nancy caught her breath and glanced up at Doc. "Th-the wagon!" she said. "Then—he's been— Oh, Daddy, you poor. . . ."

"Don't go near him," Doc said, and grabbed the girl by the wrist. "He's probably full as a tick. He'll smell like a distillery."

The girl's shoulders tensed. "You let go of me," she cried. "I guess I'll go to my father if I want to. Who cares if he's been drinking?"

"You tell 'im, honey," Henry cackled. He saw the girl cringe at the maudlin sound of his voice, and it was like a knife wound inside him. But he kept piling it on. He wasn't too far gone to know what he was doing.

"You hear what she says, Doc? 'Who cares if he's been drinkin'?' "

He saw Doc Porter's face clouding. He was a very dignified young man, this Doc Porter. Henry had sized him up long ago as the kind of insufferable young man who would put his own personal prestige, his "face," as he'd called it, above most other considerations.

"I'll tell you who cares," Doc flared. "I do. I told you I wouldn't have a town rummy for my father-in-law, Henry. If the bottle's so important to you that you'd rather see your daughter's heart broken rather than swear off the booze, that's all right with me." He glanced uncomfort-

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ably toward Nancy. "I'll withdraw my proposal."

Henry could see hot coals of outraged feminine pride starting to burn deep in Nancy's blue eyes. He fed the flame.

"Why now," he said, "you're too decen' a man t' break my little girl's heart, Doc. After you've gone an' promised to marry her."

"After he's promised!" Nancy sputtered. She shot a withering glance up at Doc. "I think you're the most hateful, conceited man I ever saw. The idea, saying you'd withdraw your proposal just because Daddy's been drinking. Well, you just needn't bother. I wouldn't marry you now if you were the last man on Earth!"

"'Atta girl," Henry chortled. There was

Nancy

a bit of her mother in this one, after all, he was thinking.

"Now, wait a minute," Doc said quickly, beginning to see how Henry had rigged this whole affair on him.

"I'm glad you didn't have the ring handy," Nancy said coldly. "It saves me the trouble of giving it back to you. Please go away quickly, *Doctor* Porter."

"Not till we've thrashed this thing out," Doc said grimly.

Henry shook his head, trying to clear it. He glanced foolishly toward Ed.

"Speakin' of thrashing, Ed, kind of gives me ideas. I'd do the job my own-self," he whispered, "only I figger it'd add up to more in the end if you was to play hero."

Ed Prentice nodded. "The lady asked you to go away, Doc," he suggested.

"You stay out of this," Doc snapped.

Ed looked at the girl. Nancy's eyes met his squarely. Ed walked up the porch steps and said, "Move along now, Doc."

Doc swung a short right hand at him. Ed Prentice ducked and Doc's hand swept over his shoulder. Ed's fist was gouging deep into the medico's stomach at precisely that instant.

Doc Porter grunted, clapping both hands to his injured midsection. Ed measured him at leisure, swept a clubbing right hand to the point of his chin.

Doc staggered back against the side of the house, his eyes glazing as he scratched for support. His head suddenly flopped down against his chest. He crumpled at the knees and pitched heavily to the porch floor.

"Nice quick job you made of it, Ed," Henry announced laconically. "Don't know when I've took so much pleasure from watchin' somebody git flattened. I believe it's plumb sobered me up. May's well git back to the shop."

Nancy looked worriedly at him. "You're sure you're all right, Daddy?"

"Providin' you ain't goin' to think too bad of me," said Henry, "after what's happened."

She was looking straight at him, smiling. "I'm not such a child as you seem to think, Daddy. I knew you'd been drinking and had stopped for my sake. I heard some people talking about it one day downtown, when they didn't think I could hear them. I think it's wonderful the way you swore off, all for me. And I think what you did today was even more wonderful, Daddy."

"You mean—you even knew why?"

"I didn't. But I do now. It worked

(Continued on page 129)

THE WOODEN HOSTILE!

By Roy Vandergoot

Tough Doc Rooker carried out his vendetta with the cigar-store Indian to the bitter end!

A FRIEND in need is a friend indeed. Slack Brady, who ran a cigar store in Pocatello when times were tough found out about that.

Those were the days of transition of nitro-glycerin into dynamite. The addition of kieselguhr to the nitro had been invented and the stability of dynamite discovered, but as yet this innovation hadn't spread over the civilized world, and more particularly not over Idaho. In the meantime, nitro-glycerine kept spreading bits of civilization over the world.

Still, the stuff came in handy ripping up mother's earth's bosom in the hard-rock mining country.

Hard rock was evident in Idaho. Also evident was Hellbound Bill, hard-rock miner, and cronie of Slack Brady, the cigar store man. On his periodical treks to town to replenish his hard-rock larder with soft grub and a box or two of tarred rope ends to fumigate the wilderness with and to keep loneliness at bay, Hellbound Bill loved to regale Brady with the hair-raising exploits of yesteryear.

Doubtlessly the wooden Indian fronting Brady's cigar store helped to inspire Hellbound's flights of fancy.

There were other men in Pocatello, men not so nice. There was for instance, Doc Rooker, a wag and a practical joker. Doc lived cheek-to-jowl with demon alcohol. When a bit under the influence he used to go from saloon to saloon keeping a skull concealed under his long black coat. Flashing the macabre thing on drunks and half-wits, he scared the hell out of them.

One fine summer day, approaching the Fourth of July, Doc, spiked to the gills with refreshments, staggered into Brady's store to buy some stogies. Staggering out again, Doc got a flash of the wooden Indian at the door. Jerking out his Colt, Doc plugged the sugar-pine chief between the eyes. The back of the chief's head went out, and so did Brady's window.

Brady's blood boiled. He sued Doc for costs and damages, to the Indian, to his store front, and to his nerves. Doc pleaded not guilty. He had, he said, shot in self-defense—Brady's Indian had leered at him, threatened with the tomahawk.

Well, Doc had a slew of witnesses to back him up, and so the judge, throwing a sidelong look at Doc's Colt, said that maybe that was the way it was, and dismissed the case.

That encouraged Doc. He let out that he resented Brady's gall, hated his guts, and like to rip out his gizzard.

Brady got the jitters, and the next time his pal Hellbound Bill dropped in for a box of tarred rope ends, Brady unburdened his bosom in Hellbound's ear.

"Fear no further, my friend," Hellbound assured him. "I have what the doctor ordered, right here in my suitcase."

He took Brady's Indian into the back-room and went to work.

When on the morning of the day following the Fourth, Doc Rooker staggered homeward in the dimness of the dawn—horrors upon horrors! A fierce Bannock warrior brandishing a tomahawk awaited him on the stairway.

With an oath, Doc whipped out his gun. Good-bye staircase, good-bye cigar store Indian, good-bye Doc Rooker.

Yep, that nitro-glycerine was touchy!

THE END

To Hell With the Sodbusters' Sheriff!

Gunpowder Novelette by

By
D. B. NEWTON

Dan's guns blasted, the slugs biting into Bannion's chest.

There'd be a hell-hot time in Jubilo that night when the renegade tinstar, Dan Hilton, spilled his good red blood for the right to lose the woman he loved, and to bring the plow to a country good only for sowing corpses!

CHAPTER ONE

Gun-Rule Rebellion

THE FOUNDERS of Jubilo, being farsighted men, built their town around a wide central square where they figured a courthouse would some day stand. But as it turned out, another town got the county seat. Jubilo was left with an empty block of hardpan earth that ran seas of wet mud in springtime, held patches of grass in summer and fall, and in winter was a crisscrossed pattern of boot tracks through snow, as punchers and townsmen took shortcuts from the false-fronted buildings of one side to the other.

It had been expected, after the courthouse failed to materialize, that new business houses would fill up the empty block. But new businesses didn't come to Jubilo. Merchants would drive their wagons in

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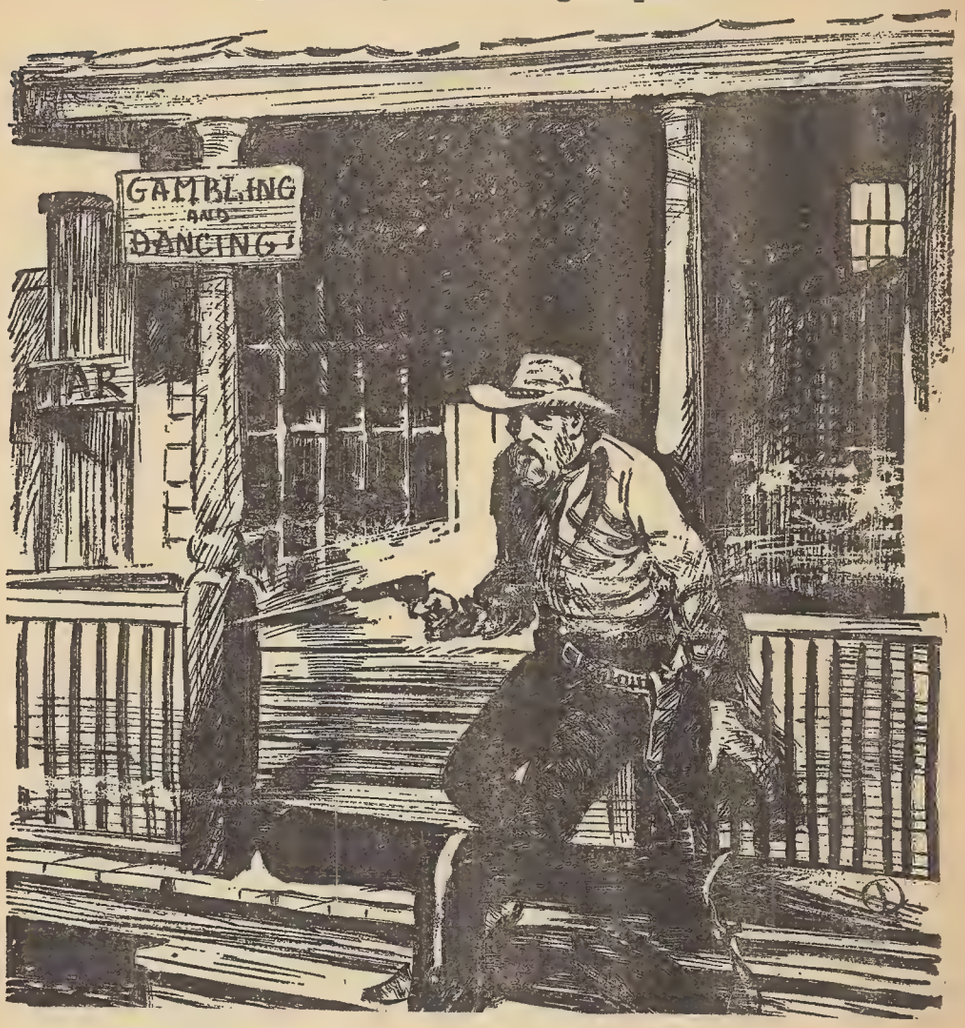

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It had been expected, after the courthouse failed to materialize, that new business houses would fill up the empty block. But new businesses didn't come to Jubilo. Merchants would drive their wagons in

across the Rim, look around, and then take their stock and set up in one of the other towns that were mushrooming, as homesteaders came pouring out of the East and onto short grass range.

No homesteaders were entering Jubilo. Martin Bannion, who ruled it with his giant Box B spread and the backing of the other, small-fry ranchers, was not going to let any Homestead Act challenge his power, or cut into sodbusters' quarter sections the land he considered his domain....

So things stood, one fine clear morning, when Jubilo woke to the fact that rebellion had quietly taken place in its midst.

Townsmen halted on the cinder paths that served as sidewalks, to stare across the muddy square at the wagon, with its dirtstreaked canvas and gaunted team, that stood beneath the bare cottonwood trees. Preceded by no fanfare, and asking no man's permission, a lean, overalled man with the look of a farmer in every inch of his stooped body had moved in on the square and made his camp.

He had his wife with him, and his children—five of them, ranging from a ragged six-year-old to a girl with raven-black hair and a figure that, under her faded and patched calico dress, had the beginning fullness of womanhood. Spring was in the air, a balmy pleasantness that seemed to draw the green frost of grass up from the muddy earth. The kids whooped and played around the wheels of the clumsy wagon. The mother and the older girl, paying no attention to the staring of curious eyes, were busily setting up a place to cook.

The man unharnessed his gaunt-ribbed team, calmly examined the neck of one where the leather had galled it, and staked the pair of broncs out to what graze they could find. Then, hands in hip pockets, he stood and squinted about him at the clean spring sky, at the drab false-front lifts of the town, and at the staring faces that peered at him from below wooden porch awnings. He was not a young man; he seemed to have a tiredness in him, and neither he nor any of his little family could have been eating much. But his smoky eyes held a stubborn strength, and so did the solid set of his lean jaw as he waited for whatever was to come.

WORD of the strange invasion quickly reached the balding Oliver James, the Mayor of Jubilo, the town's richest merchant. He was working at his credit ledger in the musty office behind his store, and when a clerk brought the news he listened, scowling, and then pushed up from his caboose chair, moved with ponderous stride through the store to the big front entrance. Standing there, he smoothed the thinning hair across his bald spot while he frowned, considering the scene under the budding cottonwoods. Then he told the clerk, sharply: "Go get the marshal. Tell him I want him here at once."

He then went scowling back to his office, not doubting that Town Marshal Dan Hilton would make haste to answer the summons.

There was no reason to doubt it; Officer Hilton usually slept in the mornings but when the pounding came at his hotel room door and he heard the order from Oliver James, he groaned but came off the bed reaching for his shoes. The marshal liked his job. Moreover, he was half way engaged to James' daughter, Dorothy, and both job and girl depended on his quick observance of the rich man's wishes. So now he dressed hastily, fingered his dark beard stubble and decided he'd have to postpone a shave. He couldn't keep Oliver James waiting on him.

In very short time he was closing the office door behind him, hat in hand as he nodded greeting to the fat man at the desk. "You wanted me, Mr. James?"

The merchant put his pen aside. "I

guess you noticed what's going on there in the square?" And as Dan Hilton nodded: "You've got to get that wagon-nester and his brood moved out—at once!"

The marshal frowned a little. "Are they breaking any law?"

"No matter!" The fat man slapped a palm sharply against the edge of his desk. "Such a spectacle is a disgrace and an eyesore on the town. The man can only be up to mischief. Jail him if you have to, for disturbing the peace—but get rid of him!"

Hilton said, "All right, Mr. James." He left the office and walked outside into the early sunlight, dargging on his hat.

SOMEHOW the marshal found himself not liking this; but he had his orders. Half unconsciously he gave a tug at the belt and gun he wore, to settle them more comfortably about his lean hips; and then he moved into the expanse of ruts which was the road surrounding the town's central, barren square.

There was certainly nothing alarming in the wagon camp under the trees. Smoke spiraled up peacefully from the breakfast fire, and the smaller children were running and shouting like all healthy kids. Dan Hilton strode toward that scene, conscious of the spot of brightness his metal star made against his chest. A pair of horsemen came jogging up the street, shod hoofs lifting dust that the morning breeze whipped away. They were Box B men, one of them Hack Cordry, ramrod of the Bannion iron. He was a bulky, lantern jawed man with a coarse tongue and something like a perpetual sneer on his face. Dan Hilton felt their stares as the two riders went past him, and a few yards farther on they hauled rein and swung down from saddle.

Hitchracks lined the four sides of the beaten-earth square, and there was a pump and wooden drinking trough for horses, on whose sides the long finger-moss hung and swayed amid the dripping of the overflow. And as Hilton paused here a moment he heard the squeaking of the pump handle and looked that way.

The black-haired older girl was drawing a bucket of water, bending to the rhythm of her work. He noticed her patched and faded clothing, and then as she straightened, brushing the hair back from her forehead with one firmly rounded forearm, she looked straight at him a moment and her eyes were the color of violets, her nose a trifle short and tip-tilted, her red lips full. Her glance was defensive and hostile; at his too-frank gaze she turned away and leaned for the brimming pail. She staggered a little from its weight when she picked it up.

It was only common courtesy that made Dan Hilton step forward. "That's more than you can handle, isn't it?" he said. "Will you let me—?"

"No!"

She tried to jerk the pail away but his firm fingers were already on the handle. "What's the matter with you?" he demanded, grinning. "Can't a fellow even—?" And then the grin faded a little as he saw tears brim her eyes, and whirling away she went stiffly toward the wagon camp with Hilton following, his long stride easily pacing hers.

Looking at the set of her shoulders, the erect way she carried her head, he had in that moment a swift intuition of the hurt pride that must be in this girl. After all, he thought, imagine how it would be for her—dressing like that, living in a brokendown wagon, pumping water at a horse trough while the whole town looked on. Even a nester was a human being, with emotions of pride and shame.

At that moment Hack Cordry's loud voice gave vent to a crude remark that reached the ears of the girl, brought quick color flooding into her averted face and neck. Half turning, Dan saw the two Box

B men standing beside their horses and laughing at the ramrod's joke. Someday, thought Hilton, someone was going to get a bellyful of Cordry's barroom humor. The gent went entirely too far at times. . . .

But now the nester woman was standing beside the breakfast fire, staring as Dan and the girl came up. He touched his hat brim to her, set down the pail. The stoop-shouldered man with the smoky eyes stepped across the grounded wagon tongue and came toward the stranger, shuffling a little in his big farmer's shoes, a granite set to his stubborn jaw.

"This your outfit?" Dan asked.

"I'm Mike O'Leary," said the nester, in a hostile voice. "This is my wagon and my family a-riding it. I guess you're the local law come to run me in." He was staring at Hilton's five-pronged star as he spoke.

"This isn't a picnic ground," Dan said bluntly. "What's the idea choosing this spot to camp?"

"It's public ground, ain't it? That's what the whole valley's supposed to be. Free range. . . I'll be damned if it's free!

"I came across the Rim into Jubilo valley a week ago looking for a place to stake my legal homestead claim. I found it along Chimney Creek—good bottom land, where a man could build him a home and plant his crops and raise his kids the way he wanted to. I felled me some timber, got it shaped up for the beginnings of our house—and then, last night, a gang of toughs riding Box B horses came and run us off!

"They said if we didn't get clear out of this valley it would go hard on us a second time. But I'm not running! There's plenty others like me, coming to Jubilo; men who need homes and have the right to take them. Someday there'll be too many even for range hogs like Martin Bannion and the other cattlemen who follow his lead. And if it'll bring that day any closer, I'm gonna make my stand—here on the one spot of public ground in Jubilo where Box B's gunmen won't be able to drive me off!"

"Maybe you are," said Dan, stiffly, "and maybe you aren't."

Bitterness touched the man's face. "Yeah, I guess I can't buck the law—even when it's nothing but a front for Bannion—"

"My responsibility is to the mayor and town council of Jubilo!" snapped Dan Hilton, anger rising in him.

"What difference? It's Bannion's orders that are carried out, no matter who speaks the words." The man's jaw set stubbornly. "Well, you got the star and the gun. What do you aim to do to me for speaking the truth?"

Dan Hilton's lean fingers were on the grip of his holstered weapon, and for a moment he stood that way studying the man who had defied his authority. Mike O'Leary's tired-looking wife stood by the fire, watching them fearfully, and the kids had stopped their shouting and were staring too. The blackhaired girl stood with her back pressed against the big rear wheel of the rickety wagon. Meeting her glance, Hilton found himself jerking his hand quickly away from gunbutt, as though the rubber grip plates had turned red hot.

You couldn't use a gun against such harmless people as these!

The whole affair was suddenly very nasty, and Dan Hilton wished he had no part in it. Somehow, he could not even feel all the anger he should have at the charge of being a mere tool of corruption and ruthless greed. He shrugged, heavily.

"My only concern is to keep peace within the town limits," he said. "Let me advise you, friend, to watch your step!"

And turning abruptly he left the man gaping as though waiting for a blow that did not fall. Without a backward glance,

he strode stiffly away across the muddy square from the wagon camp.

HACK CORDRY and the other Box B man, lounging against a hitchpole now, were watching Hilton and grinning. The marshal went past them with no more than a glance, but then some impulse of irritation made him check his stride, turn back. He went to Cordry and facing him said coldly, "You aren't half as funny as you maybe think, Hack!"

"No?" The foreman's expression changed ever so slightly, got tight and pinched at the edges; but the grin remained on his thick lips. "What's chewing you, mister?"

"Nothing's chewing me. I just didn't care for the remark you let pass awhile ago. I think you better save your cheap brand of humor for the bunkhouse, where it can't offend a lady."

"Lady?" Understanding dawned in the other's coarse features. "Oh—you mean that little tramp that give you the come-on yonder at the horse trough?" He sniggered. "Dorothy James might be interested to hear about—"

Hilton's bunched knuckles drove that back into his teeth. The blow was unpremeditated and untimed; blind anger brought the fist jabbing upward, and Dan's surprise was almost as great as that of the man he hit. Caught off guard, Cordry was arched back across the pole, his boots leaving the ground; he lost his balance and fell forward heavily to one knee. Reaching up blindly he hooked a hand across the pole and hauled himself to his feet, and there was a black flood of fury in his eyes.

"Damn you, anyway!"

He had a blackbutted gun strapped to his waist; his gloved right hand went down and wiped across the handle of the weapon but did not draw it. Instead, as he came driving up to his feet the arm shot out, a slashing blow at Hilton's face.

Dan gave back before it, but Cordry's angry rush carried him slamming hard into the lawman. With a grunt Hack Cordry recoiled and his fist came in again, landing savagely against the side of Hilton's skull. The wide-brimmed hat went tumbling into the dust. Then Dan's own fists were swinging and the two men were there, toe to toe, slugging it out with the insane madness of angered men.

Cordry fell an inch short of Hilton's lean height, but he had weight and he had the cunning gained in half a hundred bunkhouse brawls; a man who rodded a tough crew like Bannion's Box B held his job only as long as he could give better punishment than he received. He pressed against Dan Hilton, driving him hard. A clout that hit below one eye and started it swelling failed to slow the pounding of his huge fists. Hilton took a blow that split his upper lip and put the taste of blood in his panting mouth. He spat, jerked his head to throw tawny hair out of his eyes and bored in, slugging. He heard the yelling of the other Box B rider, and of a dozen other voices as men came hurrying toward the scene of the battle.

He wondered vaguely why he had never known, up to this moment, how much he disliked Bannion's hardmouthed, sneering ramrod.

Hilton had taken Cordry for granted, much as he had taken other vaguely unpleasant features of his job as marshal of Bannion's town. But Cordry had shot off his coarse mouth once too often and all at once Hilton knew the keen urging to strike and hurt, and a distinct savage pleasure as he heard Cordry's grunt of pain, saw him give ground before a heavy blow.

Then hands grasped him, dragged him back, and with a bellow of rage Martin Bannion himself was shouldering between the fighters. "Damn it, cut this out!" shouted the Box B owner. Hilton tried to wrench free, to go in after his man again;

but a couple of Banion's riders had him too tight to break away. Hauled up, panting, he quickly cooled down and the red haze of anger melted from before him. He saw other men holding Cordry.

Bannion, boss of Jubilo, was a powerful, redbearded man whose solid frame, in expensive tailored range garb, carried not an ounce of excess weight. He demanded, "What the hell is this?"

Suddenly disgusted with himself, Dan Hilton only shrugged and spat blood into the dust. Bannion turned to Cordry and the ramrod grunted, "The guy took a swipe at me. Lemme finish him!"

"No!" snapped his boss. "I won't have any such foolishness. Go get a piece of beefsteak for that eye, and forget about this business—whatever it is. And you, Hilton—come along with me. I want to see you."

Dan shrugged away the hands that gripped him, leaned and got his hat from where it had been trampled into the dirt. He gave Hack Cordry a level look. "Any time you say, Hack!" he promised; and turning on his heel followed the Box B owner across the rutted street.

Oliver James was waiting for them on the sidewalk. "That was a fine exhibition!" he said angrily. "What were you two brawling about?"

"Private matter," muttered Dan Hilton. He was not particularly proud of himself just then—and still half puzzled over the impulse that had driven him into the fight.

BANNION was saying, "What about the wagon tramp? Ollie tells me he sent you to take care of him."

Hilton touched shirtsleeve to lip, looked at the stain of blood. He said bluntly, "That gent's not disturbing the peace or breaking any law. I figured I had no jurisdiction."

"No?" Scowling, Bannion turned on the mayor. "Oliver, we got to get rid of those people. They're trouble makers. I had to throw them off of land down along Chimney Creek. I don't intend to put up with any more from them!"

Uncertainty showed in Oliver James' plump face. "What can I do?"

"You're the mayor, ain't you? If you have to, call in Clem Meeks and Bert Wagener and hold a council meeting. Cook up some ordinance or other."

James nodded quickly. "That's an idea, Martin. We'll get that done at once."

"Good!" Bannion glanced narrowly at the marshal. "And when they do, Hilton, you better enforce it!"

It was a threat to his job; Dan Hilton recognized that, but made no answer. He watched Bannion and Oliver James move off along the street together—the two masters of Jubilo. He saw Hack Cordry and three other Box B riders troop into a saloon; caught curious eyes staring at him and knew they were wondering if he meant to take up again his quarrel with the ramrod.

Instead, he turned on his heel and strode along the cinder path to the hotel, looking neither left nor right, and with a heavy foreboding riding him of trouble yet to come.

In his room he stripped off the ruined shirt, washed blood from his hurts and then shaved carefully. The skin across the knuckles of one hand was broken and discolored, his lip swollen where Cordry had smashed him.

Dressing again, Hilton beat the dust out of his clothing, knocked some shape into his battered hat. Afterwards, closing the door, he went down to the dining room for a late breakfast. But the food was tasteless in his mouth and the black coffee stung his lip. He left the meal unfinished, went through the shabby lobby where a battered clock was striking the hour of eleven.

Outside, pausing to roll a cigarette, he looked over the life of this town which he

had served, now, for better than a year—the passing of people in the street, the nester wagon looking alone and strange yonder in the center of the square. His glance was drawn to the right as he saw the gaunt shape of Clem Meek hitching along the cinder path, up the broad steps of the general store. Bert Wagener's buggy and rat-tailed bay were tied in front of the building. So he knew the town's three-man council had gathered already in the mayor's office, in answer to the summons from Martin Bannion.

"Quick enough!" he thought with a hard twist of his mouth. But what of himself? Was he, any more than they, his own master?

He threw away the unlighted cigarette, with an angry thrust, and started for the place of the meeting. He was just mounting the steps when he met Dorothy James coming out.

"Dan!"

That she was angry he could tell only in small things—the slight pucker between her fair brows, the tiny edge of her voice as she spoke his name. Dorothy James had taken her bright blonde beauty from her mother; from her father had been derived a certain pride and a temper that was generally unruffled but which could be stirred.

Dan Hilton tried to smile, and the expression stretched his swollen lip and made it sting. She was looking at that evidence of the fight with Cordry; she put out a hand as though to touch his hurt face, suddenly drew it back again. "It's true, isn't it?" she exclaimed. "What Father said—about you and Hack. How could you, Dan?"

"It was nothing," he told her; but her expression tightened.

"Nothing? You think I haven't heard the talk—that you were fighting over a—a—"

He stopped her before she could say the word. Color had touched her smooth cheek, and her nostrils were a little pinched. "Dorothy!" he said. "It isn't like you, repeating vicious gossip! And I swear that what happened wasn't anything such as you've maybe heard. Sounds to me that Hack must have been making saloon talk again—spreading his own dirty version of the story. If I thought that was true, by God I'd—"

"You see?" she cried, her own voice lifted so that he was afraid it would carry in the stillness of the spring noontide. "If it's nothing, why should you get so worked up over Hack Cordry's remarks about some—some wagon tramp's girl?"

Anger was stirring in Dan too, now, but he swallowed it down. "I tell you you're mistaken. And in any event there's no reason for you to be concerned."

"You can say that?" she cried. "When everyone knows how we have been? You think they aren't dragging my name into this?" Tears were suddenly in her blue eyes. "Oh, Dan! You—you must be blind!"

"I'm sorry." It was all he could say, but it wasn't enough.

"Dan." Her voice was suddenly quiet and level. "If you have any more trouble with Hack Cordry—or if you go near that wagon family again—it will have to be the end for us. I'm not being unreasonable. In a town this size, with my father as prominent as he is—can't you see—?"

"If Hack wants further trouble," said Dan flatly, "I can't walk away from him."

"Oh."

The meaning was clear. She had given her woman's ultimatum and Hilton had rejected it, and at that moment there was no further they could go. He had to stand there, frowning, and watch her move quickly away along the cinder path, her head high, graceful shoulders set stubbornly.

He found himself thinking, in that moment, of other days—remembering hours with Dorothy which were poignantly

sweet in recollection and had been all the reason for his staying a year in Jubilo. She had been the only rudder to steer his drifting course, and the thought that he might lose her now was almost too unsettling to consider.

But a man had his pride—he had to remember that! And Dan Hilton was beginning to wonder if, in his acquiescence to Oliver James and the arrogant rule of Martin Bannion, he might not have forgotten it too long.

He turned on his heel, went through the gloom of the store to James' closed office door, beyond which a hum of voices sounded.

CHAPTER TWO

Toward Showdown

OLIVER JAMES had his caboose chair turned around and was seated in it squarely, facing the other members of the council—Clem Meek, the pharmacist, and grayhaired Bert Wagener who owned the livery stable and feed store. James looked up briefly, said "Come in, Dan," and went on with what he had been saying, punctuating his speech with stabs of the cigar in his stubby hand.

"There shouldn't be anything difficult in this. There's already an ordinance on the books against running livestock loose in the city limits. How about one prohibiting the grazing of animals on public ground?"

Dan had taken a chair in a corner and turned it about, straddling it with arms folded across its back as he listened to the talk that was going on. He saw a doubtful expression on the gaunt features of Clem Meek; the pharmacist stirred uneasily in his chair as James spoke and suddenly he blurted:

"I dunno, Ollie. We got to be careful. This could turn out a little too raw—"

"Raw?" James scowled through the drift of blue cigar smoke.

Meek spread his hands. "Whatever move we made, it would be obvious our whole purpose was to drive this O'Leary family out of town—and at Martin Bannion's orders. Do we want to be that open about it?"

"Hey! Wait a minute!" Bert Wagener broke in before James could make answer. "That's no way to talk, Clem! We're the town council and I guess we know our own minds!"

"Certainly!" snapped the mayor. "You can't make it out that we take orders from Bannion, or anyone else. . . . The simple truth is that Martin Bannion knows what's best for this town and this valley, and we have any sense we're bound to see things his way.

"Do we want Jubilo range overrun by a bunch of ragtag shirt tail farmers—the way we've seen it happening all around us? We're business men, all three of us. How long can we go on operating if we trade Box B and the other cattle interests for poverty-stricken hoemen who won't even have the credit to buy seed?"

He was leaning forward as he finished speaking, soft fist clenching the arm of his chair. Clem Meek, frowning, had nothing to say; but the liveryman was nodding his graying head in complete agreement. "He's right, Clem," Wagener grunted. "We can't give in this time. O'Leary has got to be driven out, or it'll end just the way he says—"

Without quite knowing how he got there, Dan Hilton found himself on his feet and heard his own voice saying, "You're both talking drivel!"

Three heads swiveled to stare at him. The marshal had often sat in council meetings but had never been known to raise his voice in one before. And what he was pronouncing now was something very close to heresy, by the standards of Jubilo.

"You're talking just the way a range hog like Bannion would like to hear you!" he said, angrily. "There's room in this valley for cattlemen and farmers, too. And, given time, these same 'poverty-stricken' homesteaders you sneer at will mean more business, and more money for you than you'll ever see if Jubilo stays in the grasp of a half dozen ranchers who are trying to hold free land from the people who are entitled to it!"

The expressions on the faces of the councilmen were interesting to see. Oliver James looked as though he could not believe his ears; grayhaired Bert Wagener only stared, blinking; his jaw sagged open a little. Only the gaunt pharmacist showed by the thoughtfulness of his frown that Hilton's argument was sinking in.

It was James who first found his tongue. "Just a minute!" he sputtered. "Who the devil asked your opinion? Who asked you to butt in on this discussion with your slander of a fine man like Martin Bannion?"

"Nobody asked me," said Dan Hilton flatly. "I've sat and listened to a lot of nonsense in this room, but this time for some reason or other I figured I was due to put in my two bits' worth!"

"And well done, too!" That was Clem Meek, pushing up to his feet with a new set of determination in his bony features. "You're right, Dan Hilton—and thanks for helping me to see it! It's about time!"

"What do you mean?" Mayor James lashed at him.

"Just that I'm tired being a rubber stamp for Box B! This fellow Mike O'Leary has called the turn, Oliver. There's got to be some place in Jubilo valley where an honest man can put his family and know they'll be safe from Bannion's tough crew—even if that last place of freedom is the center of the town square! I for one am not going to back any ordinance to throw them off. That's final!" And he strode firmly to the door, wrenched it open, his jaw set grimly.

Rage purpled the chubby face of the mayor. "Let me tell you: you're only one man, Clem Meek! There's still two-thirds of the council that hasn't lost their wits!"

A chair creaked as Bert Wagener shifted uneasily. "Well now, I dunno, Oliver. I want to think this over a little more, myself. Just may be these men are right. Maybe I've changed my mind."

"Attaboy!" cried Meek. "I guess that ends the council meeting—"

Oliver James completely lost his temper. "Get out!" he bleated, shaking trembling fists at the others. "You've made a deathly serious matter into a farce. Get out of this office!"

Bert Wagener had leaped to his feet and was scurrying to the door. Dan Hilton was about to follow when the mayor's voice added sharply: "Not you!"

Turning, Dan looked down at the livid face of the seated man. Now James was forcing a control upon himself, holding himself in. He pointed a stubby, trembling finger at the badge on Hilton's shirt. "Take that off!" he gritted tightly. And as Dan hesitated: "I said take it off."

Woodenly, Hilton unpinned the bit of metal and tossed it onto James' littered desk. "You're not a bad man, James," he said. "You've just got this Bannion gent confused with God and you can't see anything wrong with a word he says. But some day you'll wake up, like the rest of us, to what he really is. I only hope that day doesn't come too late to save Jubilo!"

"Get out of here!" gritted the mayor. "And stay away from my home—from my daughter. Do you understand?"

"You needn't worry," promised Dan grimly.

He heeled about and closed the door firmly behind him. Clem Meek tried to speak to him but he brushed past the pharmacist, moved with a heavy stride through the store and out into noonday

light. Thoughts crystallized as he walked.

In his room, working with leashed anger in his movements, he emptied drawers and closet, dumped all his belongings into the middle of a blanket and quickly built a saddle roll. He jerked the straps tight and then sat on the edge of the bed staring at the bundle, hands hanging limp between his knees as he thought over the year that had passed, the trail that stretched bleakly ahead. He was through in Jubilo. His job gone, and Dorothy—

He would not even say goodbye. He knew well enough that this open break with her father meant the end of whatever had been between them.

A SUDDEN restiveness took him off the bed and to the window, which looked out across the rutted street, over the budding cottonwoods in the square, to the falsefronted buildings facing beyond. The wagon camp was half hidden to him through the tree-heads; it was a peaceful enough scene, and it seemed strange that anything was different from yesterday, and all the days before.

But the change had come. Already, he supposed, word would have reached Martin Bannion of the town council's defiance to his rule. He might even now be closeted with Mayor James, laying plans. . . . Then Hilton was leaning forward sharply, staring down into the street below, as big Hack Cordry came swaggering up the cinder path with a couple of the Box B men flanking him, talking and laughing boisterously. What caught Hilton's eye was the stab of sunlight reflected on something metallic pinned to Cordry's vest: His own marshal's badge!

So this was Bannion's answer—elevating his hired guntough to the role of peace officer! The boldness of it came as a shock to Dan Hilton, though the events of that morning might have prepared him. How could he have been blinded, all these months, to the naked rule of force for which his badge of office had been the merest front, and which was finally being pushed into the open where no man could fail to recognize it?

Now Bert Wagener came along the street, heading for the feed store in front of which his ancient buggy was tied. Hack Cordry pushed forward, cutting him off before he could reach the doorway, and with a jerk of his big fist he pulled the greyhaired man around, slammed him up against the wall and crowded in on him. Dan could hear the Box B ramrod's voice but not what he said; he saw Wagener cringe away under the lashing of speech, saw Cordry's big, splayed fingers smooth down the butt of a holstered .45. Hilton's own gun and belt were slung on a bedpost across the room. In alarm he whirled, reaching for them, and came back to the window with belt in one hand and drawn weapon in the other.

But the scene below was already ended. With a final oath Hack Cordry had shoved the councilman aside and move on along the cinder pathway with his companions.

The grayhaired man stood where he was for a long moment. Even foreshortened as his figure was to Hilton in the window above him, Dan could read the fear in the man. Suddenly, without even waiting to lock up his store, Bert Wagener was hurrying to his buggy, scrambling into it. He almost cramped the wheels in his haste to back it away from the hitching post, and then the old nag was heading up the rutted street and out of sight.

Cattycornered from the hotel, around on the street that formed the square's west side, Dan saw Clem Meek standing on the steps of his drug store. The gaunt pharmacist had witnessed Wagener's fear-stricken flight. He turned, moved back inside the building. Hilton wondered if he, too, would be making a run for it—away from the certain punishment he could expect for his audacity in saying

"No" to the authority of Bannion?

All at once, Dan Hilton knew that his own job here in Jubilo was not finished, after all. Losing his badge had only removed from him the final stigma of his servitude to Bannion. Now there was nothing left but the gun which he found he was still holding in his tight hands.

He shoved it deep into its holster, and then with firm, deft movements slung the belt about his flat hips and buckled it in place there. This town could use a gun that was not committed to Bannion's rangehog rule. There was little enough fighting strength on the other side. Suddenly Hilton understood that he could not walk out on this thing now if he wanted to—not before showdown.

A KNOT of riders came whipping leather into the town as he started to cross the wide street, and Hilton had to step back and watch them by with a scowl on his dark features. They were Box B hands, and they rode with a quiet deadliness that was not like the whooping, shouting abandon with which a bunch of cowpokes usually raced their broncs through the cattle town. As the powder-dry, red clay dust thinned and settled, he saw that they had reined in before one of Jubilo's two saloons and were dismounting there in a milling of horses.

Hack Cordry, one eye swollen and near-closed now from the mauling of Hilton's fist, stood with the saloon's half-doors pulsating behind him and the marshal's badge gleaming on his vest. Dan saw more Box B horses racked in front of the other saloon, across the square.

It was a weekday, and none of the smaller cattlemen or their punchers in from the range; but here was almost the full strength of Box B's tough crew.

The O'Learys seemed to know that things were moving rapidly. When Hilton came hurrying across the bare earth of the square toward the wagon camp he found a tenseness there. The thin, frightened crying of one of the smaller children threaded across the still air below the cottonwoods, and then he saw the oldest girl on her knees, comforting the youngster against her soft breast. The mother saw Dan moving in and spoke quick warning, that brought the girl's head up sharply. She rose to meet him, and her eyes were a dark stain against her face.

"What is it you want this time?" she demanded.

"To help you folks, if you'll let me. Surely you can see that this thing is coming to a head. There isn't much time—"

"And why should you help us?" There was suspicion in her, and proud defiance that belied the patched clothing, the near-hunger that had her pretty face too pinched and thin. "With everyone against us, why should you of all men—?"

"It's all right, Beth!" Her father had come up on them, an ancient long-barreled revolver thrust into the waistband of his jeans. "I guess this fellow's on the level. I heard there'd been a shakeup, and Jubilo had a new town marshal." His glance touched on the two pinholes in Dan's shirt front that showed where a badge had once been.

Dan nodded. "You've turned this town inside out, mister. You've made some of us see the light—pretty much ashamed of ourselves and damned grateful to you for jarring us loose of our chains. But you've also got Martin Bannion ready to do murder. That's why I've come to offer what help one additional gun can give."

"You think there'll be gunplay?" demanded O'Leary. "Here in the center of town—before witnesses? Would Bannion fight women, and kids?"

Hilton said heavily: "One wagon family has shaken his hold on an empire. The signs indicate he'll stop at nothing, now—" He broke off to jab with a hard, pointing finger. "Look at that!"

In a sudden and ominous burst of ac-

tivity, Box B men were pouring out of the two saloons. Bannion himself was there; Hack Cordry at his elbow, the red-bearded boss of Jubilo barked orders as, with a cold efficiency, his men began spreading out along the street. There were so many of them, they formed a thin line spaced clear around all four sides of the central square; and they did it without much fuss or undue noise. All loiterers had disappeared from the streets and the cinder paths. At orders from Cordry, a couple of the gunmen were gathering the reins of Box B's racked horses, leading them into alleyways where they could be held out of the line of fire.

"You see now?" muttered Dan Hilton, tightly. "This is it!"

Even as he spoke, Hack Cordry's harsh voice came across the waiting stillness of afternoon. The new marshal of Jubilo had moved alone into the middle of the street and was standing there, spread-legged, hand on gunbutt; Martin Bannion, watching from the sidelines, was letting his ramrod open the show.

"You!" bawled Cordry. "Our patience is used up. We'll give you just fifteen minutes to get out of Jubilo!"

"Stand your ground!" grunted Hilton. And stepping away from the wagon, he moved out into the open where, for the first time, that circling line of men could see him. "Hack!" he called sharply.

He saw the ramrod's head jerk sharply. "Go right ahead!" he challenged. "Pull your iron, Cordry, and let's settle this between us."

He stood crouched, waiting there in the bleak spring sunlight.

But Cordry would not accept the bid. His first surprise overcome, the ramrod plucked hand quickly away from gunbutt; and in that moment Dan Hilton knew Cordry was afraid of him—that he had no desire to match gunspeed with the ex-marshal of Jubilo, whom he had watched down fast men, and dangerous men, in the red dust of this very street.

He said now, with a snarl: "We'll settle! But we'll have this stinkin' sodbuster and his brood out of the valley first—and even you can't stop us!"

"Fine odds!" rapped Hilton. "Against every gun on the Box B payroll!"

Then the solid figure of Martin Bannion stepped through the line of men, and the Box B owner lifted his own voice to cut off the retort his henchmen might have made. "It's up to you, Hilton! If you think you want to buy into this, that's your own lookout. But you better be damn sure. And you got just fifteen minutes to make up your mind!"

He gestured to Cordry and the latter followed as his boss tramped back inside the saloon. The rest of Box B stayed where they were, leaning against store-fronts and hitch poles—twenty or more of them, in a long, straggling line that surrounded the barren square of earth and the lone wagon camp.

"Fifteen minutes!" grunted Hilton. "If there was only some way we could get your family out of this, O'Leary!"

"TAKE them to my store," said a voice. Turning, Dan saw gaunt Clem Meek at his elbow—a strange figure, with big sixgun dragging heavily in a bony hand that was far more expert at mixing prescriptions and weighing out gumdrops for the town kids. The thought of this kindly man preparing for battle struck Dan Hilton as almost ludicrous.

"It isn't your fight, Clem," he said.

"Whose is it, then?" snapped the pharmacist. He hefted the gun, eyed it solemnly. "Bert Wagener ran. I hope I've got the guts to stick. . . . Jubilo's a good town, a good country. And I've got a stake in seeing a rule of fair play started here—even if there's damn little good I can hope to do once the lead starts flying!"

"Every gun helps!" said Dan. "Now,

if you'll take Mrs. O'Leary and the kids over to your store—"

Except for the children, Mike O'Leary's wife could not have been talked into leaving her husband's side. But without a word she and Beth, the oldest girl, got the youngsters together and Dan watched tensely as the pharmacist hurried them across the square; he expected the Box B men to turn them back, but apparently they had had no instructions for this and he knew a great relief when he saw the door of the drug store close upon them. Turning back to the wagon, then, he found Mike O'Leary in the act of shoving a big, iron-bound trunk out of the bed of the vehicle. "Got to have something to fight behind," the homesteader grunted. "This ought to stop a few bullets."

"They'll have us from four sides," said Dan grimly. He knew the shape of the thing that was building here. It would be a massacre, if lead once started to flying across the open square that centered the town.

It would have seemed incredible that such a thing could be allowed to happen —unless you knew how complete was Martin Bannion's hold on the people of Jubilo.

Hilton saw this thought reflected in O'Leary's smoky eyes, saw despair creeping through the courage that had carried him this far in his challenge to Bannion. "Mebbe," he blurted suddenly, "mebbe I ought to back down. I thought all along if I made a stand, mebbe the people would back me and turn against Bannion. I was a damn fool, I see now. They're gonna let him go ahead with it—they'll let Box B kill me, and you, too, if you don't get out of this while you still can!"

Dan shrugged that suggestion aside. "No quitting now. I'm on Bannion's list, too, for daring to cross him—" He broke off sharply.

Mayor Oliver James was coming over the rutted street, bareheaded, puffing from excitement. He had a white handkerchief in his hand; when he saw them looking at him he waved it once or twice, like a flag of truce. And then he was using the handkerchief to mop sweat from his flushed, plump cheeks as he came toward the pair.

"Dan!" he panted. "You've got to stop this nonsense!"

"What nonsense?" retorted Hilton. "Martin Bannion's playing for keeps—and the least we can do is go down with guns smoking!"

"That's ridiculous! I've just come from talking to Martin—he guarantees nothing will happen if you'll only leave town, now. He doesn't want gunplay!"

"You can believe that?" He shook his head. "No, Ollie. Go on back and tell Martin Bannion we know we're dead ducks—but we'll take it standing up and not running!"

James lifted his fat palms helplessly, let them fall. They watched him trudge back across the empty street, toward where Bannion and Cordry were waiting for their answer. They watched the angry talk as James reported the refusal to surrender.

And then, without any warning, Hack Cordry had jerked a gun from holster and in mad rage sent the first bullet whipping across at the wagon camp defenders.

CHAPTER THREE

End of Range-Hog Rule

IT WAS a long distance for a sixgun, but the slug sang closely past Hilton's ear. "Hit cover!" he yelled to O'Leary; the homesteader was already diving for the protection of the big iron-bound trunk as Dan grabbed his own weapon out of leather.

As though that first shot were a signal, all the guns around the square had begun

their fire. A bleat of horror broke from the throat of the mayor, at this beginning of the violence which he had been so sure would not come. "He knows now!" Dan Hilton thought with a kind of grim satisfaction. But this turned to alarm as he saw Oliver James whirl and grab at Cordry's arm, saw the gunman jerk free and, face twisted with anger, bring his gunbarrel streaking sunlight in a vicious slash at the man's bald head. James went down like a poleaxed steer; but then Dan had his target and pulled trigger. Lead struck Cordry full in the chest, drove him twisting backwards to slam into a hitch rack and slump lifeless.

Spreadlegged, lips peeled back from clenched teeth, Dan fired twice more, deliberately, and each time saw a man's figure break and fall before his sights. At such range, it was a miracle of gunskill; the Box B forces that had started closing in broke their line at sight of it and dropped back, hunting cover of doorways and watering troughs.

The gunsound grew to a mad crescendo. O'Leary was firing from the ground, squeezed in between the big trunk and a wheel of the wagon behind him. Hilton dropped down beside him, just as a slug spanged against the metal and went screaming overhead. One of O'Leary's picketed horses went down thrashing; Box B was getting the range now— Suddenly the distinct whine of a rifle sounded; and both men ducked as its steel-jacketed shell thudded into wagon timbers just above their heads.

"Getting hot!" muttered Dan. Firing again, he was fumbling for fresh shells in the loops of his belt. He spotted the rifleman, hunkered behind a rainbarrel at a corner of the street; tried a shot but was unable to get a bead on the man. Next moment, to his astonishment, the marksman suddenly jerked erect, flinging the saddlegun away from him. He pivoted, fell loosely. Dan could not understand— until startled yells from the west side of the square pulled his attention that way.

Then he saw that the door of the drug store stood open a crack and a gun was firing there. Clem Meek! The Box B men on that side of the street, caught before his sights, were scrambling to hunt safety; that cleared one flank for the wagon camp defenders, and for the first time Dan Hilton dared to know an instant of hope. But it was shortlived as, next instant, he reached for new shells and realized how far gone was his supply. When their weapons were empty, the attackers could close in from all sides and finish them with ease.

"Hold your fire!" he yelled above the racket, to the man beside him. "Make every damned shot count—"

O'Leary, face pale and grim and splotched with burnt powder, started to answer; with a convulsive jerk he stiffened, fell forward across the top of the trunk.

Dan grabbed him by an arm, hastily pulled him down. His hand came away slick with spurting blood, but there was no chance to learn the extent of damage. For a shout had gone up as their enemies saw the homesteader take lead, and the firing took on new fury that was concentrated on the remaining defender.

There was a flurry of movement over at the westward side of the square; Dan heard a girl's shrill voice, and the blood seemed to freeze in him as he saw Beth O'Leary tear open the door of the drug store, start out wildly as though she would rush headlong into gunfire in order to reach her wounded father's side. But then Clem Meek showed behind her, smoking revolver in his bony hand. Protesting, trying to break loose, she let herself be dragged inside again to safety.

Just as the door closed the big plate window went out with a smash. But Clem's gun started firing again immediately through the splintered opening. At

Dan's side, Mike O'Leary was moaning and twisting. Dan fumbled for his wrist, found a strong pulse; the man might live, then, but only a doctor could stop his heavy bleeding; and Jubilo's medico was lying low like the rest of the townsmen, with this leaden hell blazing through the town—

Then a sudden thunder of hoofbeats, somewhere behind Hilton, grew and swept in louder. Pivoting, he peered between the wheel spokes and saw the band of horsemen tearing into sight around a corner building, stringing out as they galloped up the street through dust and drifting powdersmoke. He stared, unbelieving, as the gunfire sheered off abruptly. These were cattlemen — cowhands and owners. Broad A, Windmill, others of the smaller outfits of Jubilo valley. And riding with the leaders was a man he had never thought to see again: Bert Wagener, the councilman who had turned tail and run!

They were reining in, now, milling in the center of the street. The shooting had died completely as their horses blocked the field of fire. And now the voice of big Bob Aaronson, Broad A owner, was shouting: "Bannion! Where are you?"

The batwings of one of the saloons punched open and the Box B boss stood framed there, gun smoking in his hand. "What do you want?" he demanded scowling.

Dan Hilton, already on his feet, was hurrying forward. No bullet met him. He had been all of a sudden forgotten, in this swift turn of events.

Aaronson cried: "We're breaking this up, Bannion! With guns, if we have to!"

"You damn fools!" roared Bannion. "You want stinkin' sodbusters on Jubilo soil?"

"Rather that, than follow your lead any farther! Bert Wagener rode and spread the alarm—he said you'd taken over the town, that Cordry was marshal and talking big about how you were going to wipe out a family of nesters. He made us see that things had gone too far—and you had to be stopped!"

"Oh, he did!" Bannion's hot glare swiveled toward the greyhaired liveryman hugging saddle uncomfortably among the cattlemen. And suddenly the gun in his hand leaped as he pulled trigger, in a killing rage.

His shot missed. For on the second of his firing Dan Hilton's weapon had tipped up, his finger hitting trigger seconds before the Box B owner's. Bannion's gun exploded harmlessly into the dirt; he buckled, hit the steps of the saloon and went rolling down them—a lifeless, huddled figure that brought up with redbearded face slack against the cinders of the pathway.

It was over as quick as that.

* * *

Scared townspeople came crawling out of hiding now as the remnant of the Box B crew, finding their leaders dead, made a quick rush for held horses and took the shortest route out of Jubilo town. A little shaky in the aftermath of battle, Dan Hilton shoved his smoking gun deep into holster.

He saw Dorothy James hurrying through the crowd to go down on her knees beside her father, and he went to them. The full force of Cordry's pistol-blow must have missed Oliver James; for though there was blood on the side of his balding head he had recovered consciousness and he looked at Dan wanly.

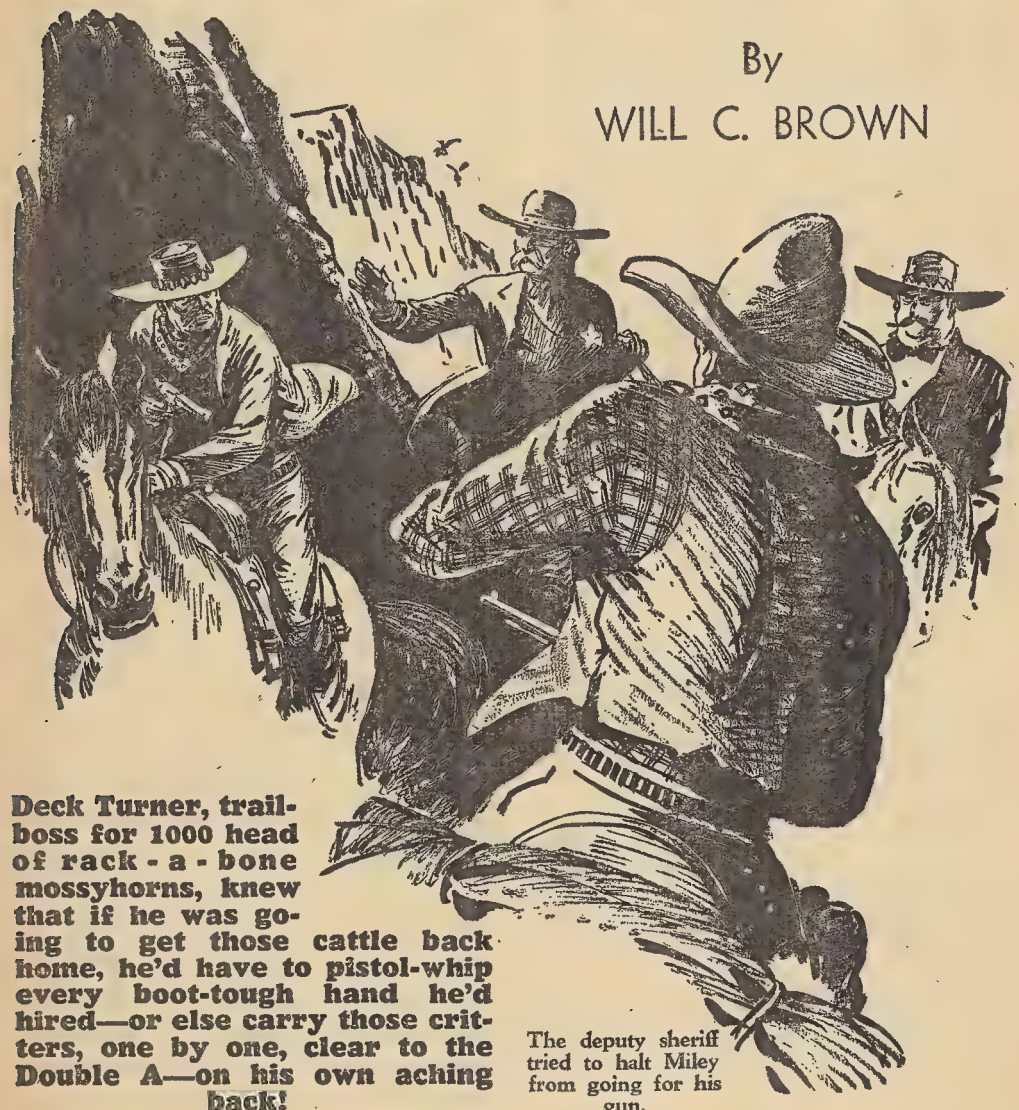
"I'm sorry I was a fool, Dan," said the mayor. "I couldn't believe Martin Bannion could really stoop to cruelty and violence; but you said I'd find out the truth —too late!"

"Bannion had us all fooled," muttered Bob Aaronson. "We thought he was a big man—that we ought to string along

(Continued on page 128)

RIDE WIDE 'ROUND SANTONE!

By WILL C. BROWN



Deck Turner, trail-boss for 1000 head of rack-a-bone mossyhorns, knew that if he was going to get those cattle back home, he'd have to pistol-whip every boot-tough hand he'd hired—or else carry those critters, one by one, clear to the Double A—on his own aching back!

The deputy sheriff tried to halt Miley from going for his gun.

THAT last night in Santone was a spiteful, threatening ghost of a night, laden with low clouds and bursts of warm rain. The lean rider tied his horse under shelter at the black foot of Soledad Street where men said that for a few pesos you could buy mavericks or marijuana, mistress or murder. A stranger, on a night like this, did not doubt it. Deck Turner painfully remembered that no trail boss with the gumption of a backward gopher would route his herd within miles of the rowdy town.

He cautiously felt the gun under his wet

slicker, then wearily moved stiff-legged against the drizzle toward the first saloon light. He wondered when he'd ever get another full night's sleep. How many days had it been since he left the comforts of the home bunkhouse at Double A? No man, he was thinking, not too bitterly, was ever before saddled with such a crazy job as his.

His patient curse was for the weather, and perhaps in the back of his mind for his eagle-like old grandfather, Amos Blocker, who had rushed him off on the damn-fool mission. He added another, more hearty, for the emergency assortment of strange trail riders he had been forced to recruit from Santone honky-tonks and riff-raff by lure of fancy pay. All he had to do now was to round them up again, end their carousing which they wouldn't want to end, and haze them toward the trail camp upriver. It would be like trying to scrape the bark off a mesquite tree. But the herd he awaited from the Panhandle was due tomorrow, and somebody had to drift those steers two hundred miles south to Double A range.

He hadn't asked for the job, Deck was thinking as he moved along the shadowy street. Grandpa Blocker had even indicated, pretty bluntly, that he didn't have much hopes of Deck's being able to do it. Deck was a straw the old man had grasped at, you might say, while the regular hands were far away on a Chisholm drive. Deck was still wondering how his grandpa had got himself cornered in such a predicament. He couldn't quite understand it, and Amos Blocker was a man who gave no more information than he had a mind to. But there must have been something mighty drastic about it. Deck heard again the urgency and hope in the old man's last hard words of advice, remembered the way his haggard eyes had mutely pleaded. His grandpa's crippled leg, which kept him confined to home range, wasn't the main worry in Amos Blocker's brain these days. There was something else.

The girl in the raincoat floated out of the eating place next door to the Big Tex. There was brief contact between yellow slicker and the softly filled raincoat. Deck fumbled to touch his rain-sodden felt, an apology forming, then stopped his hand. Most women he had seen on the night streets of Santone considered politeness a weakness.

"I'm—I'm looking for my father," she said, a little out of breath. "Would you mind going into the Big Tex and seeing—?"

"What's his name?" Deck was feeling a vague and pleasurable surprise. This one wasn't like the other women of Soledad Street.

"Pete Merkel." The window lights revealed a face of perfect features, eyes with worry behind them.

"Pete Merkel!" Deck looked down at her in surprise. "I know Pete. In fact, I've just hired your father to ride for me."

"Oh! Then you must be Deck Turner!"

"That's right." The hard edge came off his voice. "Just a minute— I'll take a look in the bar."

He hurried into the Big Tex. Pete was nursing a schooner of beer and Deck called him to the batwings. He also saw, in the crowd, a pasty-faced man named Miley, one of his new-hired riders. He'd heard since then that Miley was a killer, a bad one. But when you hire riders in Santone you're not particular. Deck vaguely noticed Miley was watching him, but he was thinking of the girl outside and followed Pete Merkel to the sidewalk. Pete was wiping the foam from a tattered gray mustache, his wise and range-weathered eyes alert.

The girl spoke hurriedly. "Blackie Scull came to the house looking for you."

DECK shot a narrowed glance at his newly hired trail rider. The name Blackie Scull jarred his mind as the

blustery wind shook the wet awning overhead. Scull was a new hand, too, a bullying giant of a man, and already he had driven away two men from the camp upriver by his viciousness. The big, swaggering Scull was bad business.

"Say what he wanted?" Pete asked calmly.

She spoke reluctantly and Deck felt his scalp bristle. "He mentioned Shad Muntzon . . . Said Muntzon wanted to see you before you left."

Pete did not look at Deck. His boss' mouth was a grim, hard line. The name the girl had spoken belonged to the cattle Shylock of the southwest. Grandpa Blocker hated Muntzon. Muntzon was poison ivy and screwworm, rattler fangs and blizzard, to every cattleman in the Rio country who might have been forced to do business, in hard times, with the Santone loan shark.

Pete seemed to remember Deck then. He turned to the young man from Double A. "This is my daughter, Jean . . . . This is our herd boss, Jean. Amos Blocker's grandson. He's the man I was telling you about."

Jean held out a friendly hand. "I've already bumped into him," she laughed. Deck found himself prolonging the holding of her hand, then awkwardly turned it loose. *Rule number one*, Grandpa Blocker had told him, was *stay away from women!* Deck wondered if the old man could have forseen anything like Jean Merkel.

"I'll be to camp by midnight," Pete told Deck. He added to his daughter, "You'd better go home, honey."

Deck spoke up, surprised at his own boldness, unable to keep from saying it. "Maybe—er—I'd better walk home with Miss Merkel . . . . It's a little late to be out, mighty dark night. . . ."

Santone seemed to mellow and lose some of its sinister coating as he walked along with Jean Merkel in the warm sprinkle, on twisting, foliage-scented streets. When he left her at her door, he had learned that she was Pete's only child, that Pete had retired from trail driving years ago to settle in Santone so that his motherless daughter might finish school. How her father might be connected with the notorious Shad Muntzon or Blackie Scull, he received no inkling.

A movement of feet off to the left in the tree shadows across the street came faintly to his ears. His boots slowed in stride, then stopped, and he whirled, feeling danger, trying to see across the darkness. His right hand was groping beneath his slicker, trying to get to the butt of his Colt.

Then, from the shadows on the other side, a flash of gun powder showed and a gun roar blasted the silence. The slug of lead ripped through the leaves of the tree at his back, and Deck had the sickening realization he'd let himself get ambushed.

His own gun was free and coming up. The powder flash came again and with the new roar he jerked at the hot bite of red fire that razored a crease across his arm.

He triggered at the powder flash, threw a second slug at the sound of running feet. Silence came back to the street as abruptly as it had been shattered. Deck ran at a crouch for a dark alley, silently worked away, circled back to the business district. An unpleasant suspicion battered at his brain. Who but Pete Merkel knew he'd be coming along that dark street? And for that matter, what did he actually know about Merkel anyhow? Except that he had a daughter that made you forget the serious job you had at hand. *Rule number two,* Amos Blocker had warned, was *always be careful—don't trust any man until you know what's inside his hide.*

Deck patiently combed out two saloons, managed to get four of his men out and headed for camp. When he reached the Big Tex, he found Pete Merkel standing outside, as if he'd been waiting.

"Mind if I look at your gun, Merkel?" Deck asked without preliminaries.

Pete squinted in surprise. He hesitated, then without speaking he pulled a worn Army model .44 from beneath his coat. The young trail boss felt a surge of disgust for his own suspicions. He abruptly shook his head, not reaching for the gun.

"Forget it. I must be loco."

Merkel slowly replaced the gun. His eyes had sighted the bullet tear in Deck's sleeve.

"Wasn't no cactus thorn made that."

"Somebody in this town would like that cattle drive delayed," Deck nodded.

"Saw that flour-faced rat named Miley floatin' around," Pete grunted.

"You see Muntzon?" Deck asked evenly.

"We talked." Pete's smile wrinkles were gone. "Reckon I'll see Scull later, at camp."

"I'd like to kick Scull across the Comal River," Deck said. "Expect drivers of *any* kind are so damned hard to find."

"Scull ain't easy to kick," Pete warned.

THE old-timer wandered along with the young man from Double A. Deck pushed open the thick wood door at the ornate front of the Glad Hand. With Merkel at his heels he stepped from the black night into a scene of garish light and much smoke and many people. He spotted a rider named Lumpkin, another known to him as Felix. Two over-painted, over-smiling house girls clung to their arms. The two punchers were buttoned to the bar and looked in no hurry to leave.

"Gettin' late, men," Deck spoke quietly. "Better drag it for camp and get some shuteye. That herd'll be in early—and it'll be rough goin' day and night from then on."

Lumpkin downed his drink, winked good naturedly, and shook the girl off his fat arm. The other girl was more determined. She released the swarthy Felix and pressed close to the newcomer. She loked up at Deck and put a tentative hand on his arm. She gazed boldly into friendly blue eyes that could go cold and stony on occasion. Deck made it such an occasion now. He stepped aside from the hand she reached to him, briefly shaking his head. The riders started for the door.

"Just a minute, *hijo!*" the scowling girl spoke sharply. "Why you butt in on us and our friends?"

"Because your friends work for me," Deck turned back and flashed a tight grin. "Double wages. And when they signed on it was with the understanding they take my orders. That suit you?"

He did not see the big man with the pock-marked face who was advancing behind him. The giant wore a dented, soiled derby on an ox-size head and his shirt sleeves were rolled tightly on massive arms, almost to his shoulders. His mouth worked with a yellowed match in a trap of crooked teeth and his eyes were like empty jigger glasses.

"He's makin' us bad trouble, Tony!" the girl whined.

Deck turned to follow her glance.

A long arm and thick fingers shot out. His shoulder was caught in an iron clutch. He saw Tony lining up the blow. The second fist swung toward his face and Deck tried to dodge it, twisting aside, and the pile-driving blow glanced off the side of his head, crashing him against the bar.

The painted girl laughed. The crowd shuffled back a little to give the bouncer more space for his performance. When Tony was in the mood, he could put on a good show when he worked on a victim in the Glad Hand.

Pete Merkel tried to push up to Tony. "That's our trail boss, Tony! He ain't makin' trouble. Them gals're crazy!"

Tony flung Pete back like a bear pawing an old acorn.

Deck's head was bruised and burning. *Rule number three,* his grandpa had said,

was *keep out of trouble. Don't rope violence—not in Santone! You got one job, son, just one—get them cattle back! There's more depending on it than you know!*

The words flashed through his whirling mind, seemed to tie up his muscles. How would grandpap know anything like this might happen, that a man sometimes had to rope violence whether he wanted to or not! Deck was frozen, uncertain.

He dropped his arms. He warily reached and picked up his hat, and Tony waited hungrily, chewing the match, and the girl laughed again. Deck walked twice around the big man and the crowd saw that Tony was going to let him go, that Tony was not in the mood tonight to crush bones and bloody the floor. Tony didn't fool with cowards. Tony liked fighting men.

Pete and Felix had stopped at the door. Blackie Scull was standing there, blocking the way. Blackie was as big a man as Tony. He stood in his tracks, looking at Deck. His fingers had a habit of drumming on his gun holster. His mouth was scarred from an old knife slash and perpetually wore an unpleasant smile.

"Kinda in a hurry, ain't you, boss?"

"Time to head to camp," Deck started to push on past. "Better find Miley and pull out, Scull. The herd will be in about sunup."

Scull stood there, his bulk unmoving.

"I went to your house looking for you, Merkel," Scull spoke, keeping his eyes mockingly on Deck. "Didn't find you—but sure found a parcel o' good-lookin' daughter!" He laughed sharply. The laugh was the kind that made Deck's spine tighten like a twisted rope and he felt hate, suddenly, for this man he had merely disliked before.

To Deck, then, Blackie said loudly so the whole room could hear: "You look sick to the belly, Mister Trail Boss. You have trouble with my brother Tony? Maybe Miss Merkel would be more to your likin'!"

Deck felt that sink in. "I didn't know Tony was your brother, Blackie," he said.

Scull nodded, enjoying it. "Bad pair of kids, they used to call us in Santone. What you think?"

The pock-marked face of Blackie Scull's brother loomed up at the bar when Deck turned slowly to look back. Tony was enjoying the show, too. The crowd was grinning. The Scull brothers had buffaloed another stranger.

The anger in Deck subsided and he felt something cold and calm take its place. Maybe if Blackie hadn't referred to Jean Merkel he might have edged out of there, tried to avoid trouble, concentrated on the job. But he was thinking now that Grandpa Blocker would agree there was a limit to the things a man can take.

DECK was hard-muscled as an oak from a life of tough range work, and old Ed Suggs, the foreman, himself had taught Deck as a kid the fine art of rough and tumble fighting, and the scientific kind, too. Suggs was an old head, an expert at it—just as he was with a sixgun. Deck was thinking of Ed Suggs now, as he slowly unpeeled his slicker. He took it off, in slow, deliberate movements. He shook his gunbelt loose, handed belt and slicker to Pete Merkel.

"I didn't know Tony was your brother, Scull," Deck said. Blackie waited, tense now, eyes like a hungry panther. Deck's voice reached the nervous spectators in the big room behind him. "You're signed on as one of my hands, Blackie, and I need you. You're scum, Blackie—but you're a rider. But Tony don't work for me. While I'm doing business with him, Blackie—you just consider him as representing you."

Deck walked on boots that rattled loudly in the silence. He headed slowly toward the bar, toward Tony. He stopped three

paces back from the big, derbied bouncer. "Take the knife out of your belt," Deck spoke patiently. "Lay it on the bar. Somebody in Santone's got the idea a stranger is easy pickin's. Let's get it settled."

A bartender looked inquiringly across the room to the mustached proprietor. From the corner of his eye Deck saw the owner slowly shake his head. Tony worked the match in his teeth. He put the knife on the counter, his dead eyes fastened to Deck.

Tony made the first lunge. He was powerful but he was slow. His arms swung like a charging bear's and Deck ducked under. He put the mighty boost of his shoulder behind a crashing jab of his hard fist into Tony's stomach. He had noticed the soft bulge there, knew it was Tony's weak spot. Tony shuddered, all the air gushing out of him, and his eyes turned green. Deck repeated instantly with his left fist, pumping the blow in with shoulder and leg behind it, and then he delivered the hardest explosion he could deliver, another right smashing into Tony's big middle. Tony staggered, and two hundred and thirty pounds of Blackie Scull's brother poured slowly to the floor. The fight was over. Tony was sick and the bartender looked disgusted. People turned away from the stricken giant.

Deck walked past Blackie, taking his gunholster and slicker from Pete whose mouth was twitching in a grin under his ragged mustache.

"Daylight, Scull—I'll expect you at the camp and ready to ride."

Then Deck was outside, and the wet night air felt good, and Pete and Felix moved alongside of him, not saying anything, and Deck somehow heard their silence as eloquent approval. He hoped Grandpa Blocker would understand. Old Ed Suggs, he knew, would be pleased. Ed had taught him those stomach smashes. They always worked well on a big man with a soft, whiskey-weakened belly.

They rode north toward camp. It was long after midnight when Deck bunked down in the bed of the supply wagon. Merkel and Felix went on to the bunk tents beyond the chuck wagon, where the remuda was held in a small flat just above the narrow river.

The double roar of a sixgun and the ripping crashes of two lead slugs tearing through the wagon bed blasted Deck out of his sleep. He struggled dazedly from the wagon, scrambling for boots and gun. Voices came from somewhere near the tents. The horses were plunging about in nervous fright.

Merkel had his gun in hand when Deck came up.

"It was Blackie Scull," the old man snapped. "Said he saw somebody trying to steal the horses and took a shot at 'em."

"Damn near got the sneakin' thief, too!" Scull's coarse voice rumbled in the dark. "You heard how he took off! Hadn't been for me, we'd a lost them horses!"

"Came damn near getting me!" Deck stalked up to him, anger burning in him. "That's twice tonight lead's come my way."

"You doubtin' my word?" Blackie's voice was menacing in the dark.

"Get your horse and ride out of here, Blackie," Deck ordered. "I'm hard up for riders, but not this hard up. I'll carry them steers in by the horns if I have to, one at a time—before I'll put up with any more of you!"

DECK whirled and walked off in the darkness, leaving Scull cursing, the other men silently crawling back into bunks. Deck took his bedding and slipped to the fringe of the low brush fifty yards from camp. He spread his bunk there but had hardly rolled into it when he heard the sound of a rider. The horse was coming at a fast pace, somewhere on the trail from Santone. He piled out of the cover again,

gun in hand, and worked toward the trail above the river. Then he heard a second horse. This one was coming from camp. The two riders would meet somewhere near him.

He waited just off the trail. The horses came nearer. There was a short, sharp scream, muffled sounds of a struggle. Deck abandoned cover and ran for the two horses. He sprang for the tall man in the saddle, trying to drag him out, to tear him loose. A sudden blast of sharp light exploded in his head. A tide of momentary blackness washed his brain and in a pained stupor he worked the trigger, trying to hold the gun on the retreating horseman.

"He's gone," a voice spoke in his ear. "I'm Jean Merkel—are you hurt?"

"What happened?"

"I was trying to get to your camp, to tell you—Blackie Scull was riding toward town and we met here and he tried to stop me. It's Shad Muntzon—that's what I wanted to tell you. He's trying to stop your drive. He had Scull planted in your crew, Miley too, and some others. I think it's because of trouble between Muntzon and your grandfather."

It began to dawn on him, a little. Here, somehow, was the seed of the worry that had been wrinkling the old man's forehead these weeks.

Pete Merkel came puffing up, and Jean told them, excited and fearful. Muntzon had come to her horse, inquiring if Pete had left for camp. "Scull was with him," Jean related. "I was scared. When they left, I slipped out along the fence, heard them talking on the sidewalk. They were going to try something in the morning, try to stop the drive. If Blackie didn't kill Deck first. I guess Blackie was suspicious. That's why he tried to stop me."

They walked toward camp, Deck silent in his own worried thoughts, feeling that Grandpa Blocker had sent him to tread quicksand. Grandpa had told him a long time ago he'd make a Texas cowman of him—but Deck had thought cattle ranching involved cattle—just cattle. He had not expected his education would have to include crawly elements like Santone and Tony and Shad Muntzon. It came to him then that old man Blocker had faith—that it was not altogether a wild gamble to the wise old range man. His shoulders lifted a little. Amos Blocker had picked Deck because he thought Deck could do the job! Deck knew that, now, and knowing it made his heart warm, like the looks of the yellow moon trying to break through the clouds overhead. Damn the grizzled, shrewd old hoss thief back at Double A! It was his way of saying to Deck his training was over—that he had arrived. That he was a cow *man!*

"Muntzon was lookin' for me," Pete grumbled, as they moved along in the dark, "to offer me a bribe. Might as well tell you—he wanted me to help Scull delay your drive. Suggested we stampede 'em."

"I might have guessed it," Deck grinned to himself at the contempt in the old rider's tone. "And I'll bet it was that rat-mug Miley that tailed me to your house and tried the ambush in the street. But tell me, Pete—there's something funny about the way you come into this thing!"

Pete spoke reluctantly, but Deck could hear beneath his words the trace of a salty grin.

"Your grandpa sent mortgaged stuff to Kansas, son. Muntzon held the mortgage on that herd. It takes financin' to run cows in Texas. So technically, he could send Amos to prison for shippin' mortgaged cattle out of the state. He'll do it, too, if you don't get this Panhandle herd home pronto to replace the other one."

So that was the reason Grandpa was so tight-mouthed, in such a grim hurry! "A little risky, wasn't it?" Deck wanted to know. "Flirtin' with the law that way?"

"Not at all!" Pete retorted. "Muntzon gave him permission to market that herd,

savvy? Gentleman's agreement. So Amos sent the herd to Kansas. Smart business, too. Market a fat herd, replace it with this stuff from the Panhandle, fatten this one, pay Muntzon from the Kansas sale, get release of the mortgage. Then Muntzon double-crossed him. Meant to, all the time. He saw a way to put the squeeze on, same as steal Double A ranch. He's crafty. Your grandpa will be all right if he can get this new herd to Double A range—the mortgage don't specify *what* cattle are attached!"

Deck paused in the dying light of a camp fire near the bunk tents. He faced the old-timer and Jean. "Pete," he spoke softly, "you seem to know a lot about this deal."

Pete twisted a booted toe in the dirt and tugged at the frayed end of a mustache. "Aw hell, Deck—might as well tell you. I rode the range with Amos Blocker for years, when we was young 'uns out here. He wrote me about you, about his deal, all his troubles. Asked me would I manage to get hired on your crew. Just to kinda keep an eye out, to give you a little help if you needed help. But he said give you a free hand, that it was your job. Just wanted me to be handy, I reckon. So here I am." He cleared his throat and added dryly: "Amos didn't make no mistake—to now, you've done right well! . . . Jean, come on, I'll fix you a bunk in one of the wagons. Ain't safe for you to head back to that Muntzon town tonight!"

BY NOON, Deck had the drive organized, the cattle strung out, moving south, on the high plain west of Santone. He had completed the delivery soon after daylight, made a tally with the Panhandle foreman, taken possession. He had named Pete Merkel straw boss and Pete was trying to be everywhere at once, keeping an eye on the Santone riders, including those he suspected of being Muntzon's men, keeping alert to stragglers, planning the route. Jean rode behind the herd in a supply wagon.

"It's going too smooth." Deck told himself, looking down from a rise at the long, crawling string of a thousand scrawny steers. "Can't believe it. Muntzon wouldn't quit this easy!" And in the next breath he added sharply, "And here it pops, right now!"

Toward Santone he had sighted the approaching riders. They came out of the river trail, turning their horses toward Deck. There were four of them, and they spread out a little. Pete Merkel pulled up alongside Deck and the two watched, without speaking.

Scull was the first one Deck recognized. Then he saw Miley. One of the others wore a law man's badge glittering on his vest. The fourth, fat and thick featured, sat his saddle like a man who might own the whole state of Texas.

He was the one who spoke first when they pulled up twenty paces away.

"I'm Shad Muntzon," he said loudly, without preamble. "This man's a deputy sheriff. If you're Deck Turner you're charged with conspiracy to dispose of mortgaged property. The deputy has the warrant and it's legal. You coming peaceful?"

Deck tried to keep from showing the sinking feeling that hit his stomach. Muntzon was playing a high trump. It was one thing to buck men like Scull or Miley or Tony—but the law was something else. Muntzon had him trapped. If he had to go fight a court case in Santone, that would be the last of the herd. Muntzon and Scull and their bribed riders would see that it disappeared.

Pete Merkel had a ferocious scowl on his wrinkled face. "That's a hard blow, son," he muttered. "Damned if I know the answer to that one."

Muntzon and the deputy kicked their horses a little closer.

"I reckon I got to take you in, Turner,"

the law man muttered. "Muntzon swore out a warrant. You can make bail, maybe, in three-four days."

"Slow down a minute!" Deck's voice was hoarse, his hands sweaty. He was grabbing at straws, and this one seemed the strongest in sight. "Muntzon charges my grandpa disposed of a mortgaged herd —that right?"

The deputy nodded. "I saw the mortgage. Thousand head."

"All right!" Deck's voice rose in hard challenge. "Here's the herd, deputy! This very damn herd here! The mortgage didn't say *what* cattle! Here's your damned thousand steers, Muntzon—I'm turning them over to you as of this very minute and I'll ask you for a cancellation on that mortgage! These cattle are skin and bones and they ain't as fat as they'd be after a spell of Double A grass, and you ain't got a rider fit to shoot, and this ain't your grass so you'll have to keep 'em moving, somehow. Maybe you'll have to eat 'em or frame 'em, I dunno! But they're yours, friend—and I'll take that mortgage paper now, deputy!"

Muntzon's jaw snapped open in surprise. The deputy looked at Deck, then at Muntzon, and a grin hovered on his mouth but he cut it off. Muntzon was gripping his saddlehorn as if he was being bucked. Deck could see the boldness of his challenge had banged the wind out of the Santone kingpin.

Muntzon's face was darkening in wrath. It was plain to the others, tensely waiting, to see that Muntzon was suffering. He had been hurled a bluff he could not call. His eyes showed hatred as he stared long at the young rider there in front of him, and then the Shylock's temper exploded out of control.

"You know I can't take these skeletons, you damn smart son. . . !" He yelled the words in thick-tongued fury. They seemed to touch off the nervous hand of the white-skin Miley. The little gunman was coming up with his sixgun, even as the deputy yelled a warning. Deck was watching Miley, anticipating him, and his gun hand moved swiftly. They both jerked on quick triggers. Miley's bullet left a thin red line on Deck's neck, but old Amos Blocker's grandson had not misssed. Miley bent limply from the saddle, was dragged a few feet by his horse's frightened plunges, then fell free and still in the short grass of the prairie.

The sixgun shots, Deck realized, must have been taken as a signal for attack by Muntzon's men planted in his herd crew. Four of them were racing from the herd, now, sixguns out and blazing, apparently believing they were joining Muntzon in a general attack. It was too late for Muntzon or the deputy to palaver. The deputy himself spurred his horse forward, started yelling. Muntzon and Scull sat their horses, glum and dismayed. The four men from the herd may have recognized the deputy, sensed that there was no fight for them to join. They looked puzzled, then pulled aside sharply, skidding their horses, and turned tail for the river. Deck whirled back to Blackie Scull. The big man's hand wavered an instant, half-way to his gun. Then he held it stiffly out in front and let it rest limply in plain sight on the saddlehorn.

Blackie and Muntzon were beaten, and they knew it.

"Get your herd moving, Turner," the deputy said abruptly. "I don't think Muntzon wants to foreclose right now. Take 'em home, son. Fatten 'em up and make a profit! Good business. Muntzon —you want to drop that charge, I reckon?"

Muntzon and Blackie were looking down at the still body of Miley. Then they were riding toward Santone. They were slumped in the saddle and they did not look back. The deputy said something under his breath, threw a half-salute to

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Corpse on Hangman's Ranch

By Dave Sands

CHEROKEE JOHNNY LANGFORD was a half-breed. Rumor had it that his mother was a chief's daughter.

That there was a lot of Indian in him was obvious as soon as one looked in his eyes. They held that dark, mystic look so often seen in a red chieftain or the tribe's medicine man, an affinity with things unseen, with the spirits of the soil, the air, the water, the things that grew and roamed on the great American continent.

Once Johnny had done a hitch in the Army, and now, the spring of 1868, he was wagon-master at Fort Wallace.

Buck La Roche was one of the teamsters. Buck didn't get along with Johnny.

It didn't help when a comely Indian maiden made the plot triangular.

It was obvious that this couldn't go on forever, and it didn't. The blow-off came one day when the wagon train returned from hauling provisions to Colonel Bradley's command encamped on the Frenchman's Fork of the Republican. That day, words led to deeds. Both men whipped out guns and started shooting. When the smoke cleared away, Buck lay dead and Johnny badly wounded.

The teamster planted Buck on the prairie, loaded Johnny on a buffalo robe bed in one of the freight wagons, and hauled him into the Post. Here the commanding officer, investigating the affair, found that Buck had drawn first.

However, for the good of the service it was decided that he should be relieved of his job as wagon-master. So when Johnny recovered from his wounds he found himself chief cook and bottle washer of the wood and hay detail.

In August, the haying detail was at the Rose Creek Ranch, owned by a man named Tim McClure. Johnny, who had an Indian's liking for the outdoors, made it a practice to sleep on the flat roof.

That night, a band of men slipped up in the dark. While one hardcase held a gun on the rancher's wife, their leader ordered McClure to call in Johnny.

Fearful of harm to his wife, McClure complied, climbing the ladder to the roof.

He shook Johnny awake. "Someone to see you, Johnny."

Johnny grunted, pulled on shirt and pants and boots, and came on down.

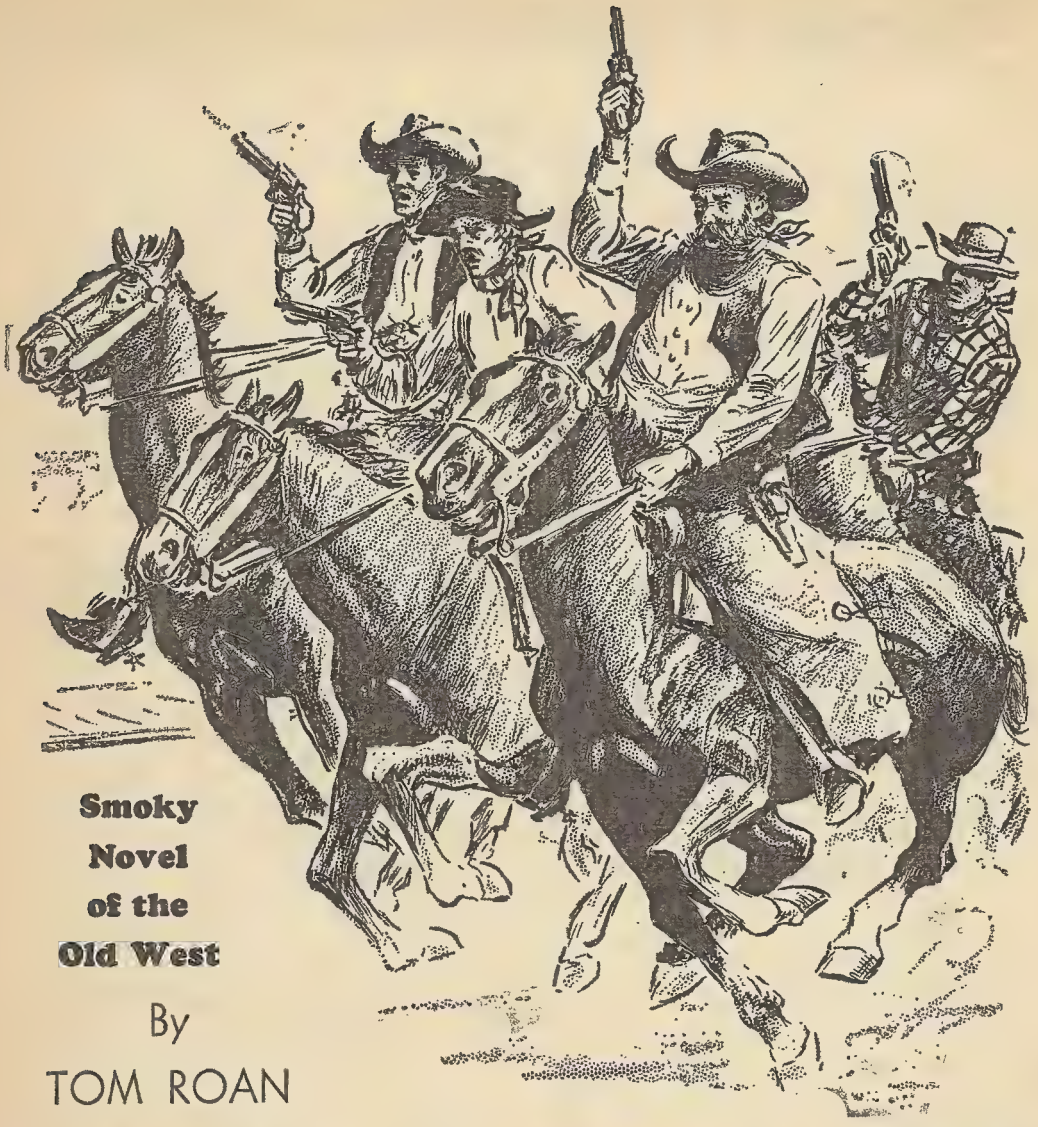
"Don't hang him here," begged McClure.

Johnny looked at the rancher out of his mystic Indian eyes. His voice held a strange cadence when he spoke. "You betrayed me, Tim. For that I put a curse on this ranch. You won't live to enjoy this place. Nor will anyone ever. It will be a ranch of death. I shroud it with the blackness of night. By the Great Spirit of the Indian people, it stands accursed!"

After that, Johnny said no other word. They loaded him in a wagon and hauled him where the cottonwoods grew. When they had some trouble casting the loose end of the rope over a high limb, Johnny took it and climbed the tree. With his own hands he tied the rope. Then, uttering a warwhoop, he leaped to his death.

McClure was so panic-stricken with the curse, he fled the ranch. In short order six men, taking over, died one after another—Dixon, Grover, Comstock, Baldour, Mason and Farrish. After that, no one wanted the place.

It was indeed an accursed spot!



Smoky Novel of the Old West

By TOM ROAN

FEUD GUNS BLAZE ON FUNERAL RIVER

When Funeral River's "gutless" lawman sat at ease, while Bull Bellarkin blew that town wide open and the bodies of murdered men lay in the street, citizens prayed for boothill to return them the ghost of old Pitt Henshaw—the only man who tamed Funeral River and lived long enough to tell about it!

Bull rode out of town with his men and really raised hell.

CHAPTER ONE

Guns Let Loose

THERE was a hint of trouble even in the blobs of dust rising in slow and lazy clouds down the valley where the cottonwoods lined the deep banks of the river. Groups of riders on spirited horses, wagons and buckboards, were still coming, more of them in the bright morning sunlight to swell the crowds in Funeral River. Many had come in the day before, pitching their camps around the big spring behind the court house and jail at the head of the street. Others had settled themselves quietly around another big spring on the oak-groved flat beyond the old wooden wagon bridge spanning the deep chasm of the river at the foot of the street. Smoke down there still simmered up from fires where breakfast had been cooked beside tents and a couple of old covered wagons, several with pots on now for the noonday meal.

At eleven o'clock it would be a certainty that old Pitt Henshaw—sheriff of

Funeral River for thirty-six years—was going to have the largest Sunday morning turn-out for his funeral any man had ever had in this section of the mountain-walled Montana cattle and horse country. Men and women had come jamming into town Thursday afternoon, filling it to overflowing until long after midnight after the news had been sent flying on the wind to the near and far rangelands, telling he had been found at dawn. Dead beside his old gray Bullet, his body riddled with a double-charge of buckshot on the winding trail coming down out of the snow-capped mountains from Timberline, twenty-odd miles north of town.

Pitt Henshaw had had loads of friends, some of them cool and far-reasoning men, others as quick of temper as triggers and apt to do any old fool thing unless a man held them solidly under his thumb. For years no man had thought it worth the bother, along with the prospects of almost certain defeat, to run against Pitt when the election times rolled around. He had had this entire country in his lean old paws of hands, often riding far and late, the one man who could settle disputes and quiet near-war when it would have flamed and gone completely out of bounds with any other sheriff. Men had often likened him to a man standing between two smoking cannons facing each other, his hands clamped over the muzzles, holding back the roaring fire and thundering shells.

Long Jim Cassidy knew he was in for it as he paced the wide and narrow office of the big old jail on the second floor of the court house, pale eyes troubled as he watched the street and the valley. Often he stood watching from the windows at either end of the room, looking across the deep gorge of the river curled around the west side of town. His yellow-mopped head sometimes lifted, eyes staring at the snow-peaked Devil Range, the great walls of mountains out of which the first trouble might come from the mean Bellarkin crowd. He spent even more time at the opposite windows, looking at the white-fenced graveyard in the little churchyard six or seven hundred yards east of town.

THREE men just now leaving the graveyard with long-handled picks on their shoulders and heading for the little tool house behind the church told him that the grave was finished and ready for Old Pitt's coffin. And when Old Pitt was in the ground and covered over anything could happen, especially with so many people in town. None of them had thought it necessary to leave their guns at home, though buttoned coats were hiding the most of them. There would be rifles, too, in many of those innocent-looking buckboards and wagons, kept out of sight under seats or blankets but within easy reach in case hell blew loose.

At twenty-six Jim Cassidy was too young for this job. With Old Pitt on the job it had been all right. Old Pitt would do the fighting and the trouble-stopping. Everybody had said that. But trying to hold the job alone, Jim would be like a man in a red-hot saddle on an outlaw horse. Dozens had said that since Thursday, right here in town. Others had said it out on the ranges and in the hills. "Too much," had growled one old cowman, "like puttin' a tenderfoot in an outlaw's saddle when the tenderfoot never saw a hoss before!"

And people were actually laughing at him behind his back when he combed his unruly hair, put on his big white hat and a long-tailed black coat to hide his guns and quietly walked down the street—his third trip of the morning. No one, he knew, actually envied him or wanted a chance to fill Pitt Henshaw's boots. Others were actually happy to see such a "young un" trying to fill them. They would have no fear of him. In case of trouble he was something to be ridden

over and down, men laughing at his efforts to stop them.

Another man might have backed out of it completely, but he could not do it —not without thoroughly convincing every man and woman in the country that he was an outright yellow-belly, a coward who had turned tail and run for it the moment a tea kettle started to sing on a hot stove. Pitt Henshaw had made him his under-sheriff, and it was long and long the general rule for such a man to take the sheriff's place when he was killed or otherwise died in office.

Old long and lean Frank Wilson had promised to continue to take care of the jail. A few others had promised to be part-time deputies in case of trouble, but a man could not be too sure of any of them. Old Pitt had never depended too greatly on any of them. But Old Pitt had had something besides the gold star on his vest, something mysterious, all-powerful, a secret that could make near-mad men drop their guns at the last second and wheel back into at least an outwardly peaceful line. Now he was dead, just three weeks to a day after he had buried his wife in that same little graveyard on the flat, and his secret had gone with him—and with his wife if she had known it.

A fierce rattle of hoofs turned him when he was half-way down the street. He stiffened as he looked, eyes narrowing. Old Bull Bellarkin, backed by six red-nosed huskies of his mean Circle Bell crowd, was riding in from Kettle Drum Valley, high up in the Devil Range. As always, making an unholy show of himself, he came banging down the street, the dust rolling from the fast hoofs of his big old bay, a wall-eyed horse liable to take a loco fit and kick everything around him to pieces. He looked like a short-legged barrel in his saddle, black hair and beard a wildly blowing cloud. Neither Old Bull nor any of his men had made it a point to hide the six-shooters at their hips, the rifles bobbing on every saddle.

"Hi, young un!" he boomed as he thundered past. "How's yore new spurs afittin' the goslin's shanks?"

That was an insult, especially when the rest of the men filled the street with roars of laughter rising above the noise of the hoofs. Cassidy ignored it. He watched them gallop on. At the last moment, down near the foot of the street, Old Bull swung wildly to his right, pulling up short just before his bay was setting himself to jump the hitchrack in front of the Funeral River Saloon, the others snatching to the same quick halt. Every man flung himself out of his saddle. The cloud of dust they had pounded up half-hid them as they followed Old Bull into the saloon, so boisterously it looked as if they were trying to tear the red swinging doors off their hinges.

Every man in that crowd already looked half-drunk. They usually came in like that, tanked up on an ungodly brand of whiskey Old Bull was known to make for himself somewhere in the hills or caves in the canyon walls around the Circle Bell. But as long as they remained in the Funeral River everything would be quiet—except for the noise they would make themselves at the bar. Sometimes a man could hear them all the way to the jail, every man apparently unable to talk or laugh except at the top of his voice when he had a little whiskey in him.

It was different across the street in old Battle Bill Albright's Saloon and Restaurant. Eight horses were at the hitchrack, each one's right hip marked by Big Mike Ringo's Flying Hatchet brand. Big Mike and his crowd were usually quiet when they rode in from the Music Bells, the towering range east of town. In addition, Battle Bill Albright was not a man to allow howling and hooting in his place, not if he had to grab a bung-starter in one hand and a .45 in the other and drive his entire crowd out, kicking the door closed and locking it behind them.

Trouble could come at any moment, though Cassidy expected it to hold off until after the funeral, if it came at all today. Big Mike Ringo would be decent enough. He had been Pitt Henshaw's friend, and he was here to pay his last respects in the best clothing he possessed. His wife and his yellow-haired girl, Lane would be there, coming in in a buckboard. Big Mike hated Old Bull worse than any rattlesnake that ever crawled on its belly, and yet he would lean backwards to keep the peace. For Old Bull and his crowd would be certain to be at the graveside. No ten men could herd them inside the little church. If he kept his mean old mouth shut among the women and children up there, then all would be well enough.

But nothing could go well for very long at a time with Old Bull Bellarkin and his crowd in town. As Cassidy strolled on he was stopped in his tracks by the thundering roll of a heavy Colt inside the Funeral River, a yell lifting with it, then a rush of booted and spurred feet as another burst of gunfire came.

The swinging doors parted as if an explosion had taken place just inside them. Out in the bright light popped a hatless man in boots and black chaps, blood already making a red smear down the gray bosom of his shirt. In a running fall he struck the hitchrack, wrapped himself half-over it, and flung back. Staggering, still trying to run, he went on around the lower end of the rack, tottered out across the street, and fell in the dust just behind the horses in front of Battle Bill Albright's, a brown puff lifting around him.

This was the beginning—even before the funeral! The man who had gone down was Tip Rett, not locally rated as one of the finest characters at best. He had once ridden for the Circle Bell, suddenly leaving it for some reason very early in the spring. Later, because men were short and hard to get, he had ridden the spring round-up for Big Mike Ringo, leaving there only a couple of weeks ago. Now he was down, shot by either Old Bull or one of his rowdies, and it would mean fast moving to keep a gunfight from taking place here.

Cassidy raced on now, and whipped himself inside the Funeral River Saloon, the doors slap-slapping behind him.

HE STOPPED, blinking from the bright light outside, and then he was seeing old Matt Ferguson's big bald head and hairless face staring like a ghost behind the bar to his right. The others were lined up in front of the bar, their backs to it. Big, red-headed and freckle-faced Eck Broome, one of Bellarkin's top-hand bronc handlers, took a pace forward, shuffling empty shells from a long, hot-barreled Colt and hastily reloading from his belt-loops. Bellarkin's voice came then, full of malice and bantering:

"An' now," he leered, "here comes our new boy sheriff of Funeral River! Kind of a handsome jasper, ain't he?" He laughed thickly, "Step right up, kid, an' have yoreself a drink! One of these days maybe yo'll learn to quit drinkin' strawberry soda-pop an' start in on good hundred proof whiskey like a man."

"You know I don't want a drink, Bellarkin." The new sheriff was ignoring his remarks and so calm about it all it would have been startling to most men as he moved forward, thumbs hooked over the broad old silver buckles of his wide black belts. "I was hoping that nothing like this would happen this morning. Why did you shoot Tip Rett, Broome? You might as well come clean with it."

"Eck ain't doin' no talkin' just yet, I reckon." Bellarkin answered him, swelling his big chest. "Maybe now, young fella, Eck'll decide to come in an' tell yuh about it next week."

"Then I suppose for now Eck will have to go to jail." Cassidy had halted six or

seven feet away from Broome. "Better hand me that gun, Eck, and don't get any foolish notions while you're handing it over."

"I ain't handin' over my fightin' tools to nobody, Jim Cassidy!" Broome clicked the loading gate of his weapon closed and arrogantly slid it into a long black holster. "If yuh wanta 'rest me, Bull Bellarkin's big enough to stand good for me to appear in ol' Barney Bailey's court when he wants to set a trial day."

"You're going to jail right now, Broome." Cassidy took another pace forward. "You're no man to have running loose in this town this morning, not after you've probably killed a man. I haven't had a chance to look at him yet. If Judge Bailey sets bond for—Look out now!"

A hot-headed fool when sober, nothing less than a wild devil when drinking, like the rest of these Circle Bell riders, Eck Broome had surged back, right hand dropping to the butt of the reloaded Colt. It was all in an instant, all in a flash. No one seemed to know exactly what had happened for seconds afterwards. Cassidy had simply surged in, as quick as a tiger on his feet. A powerful right fist had shot upward, a smashing blow straight to the point of Eck Broome's chin, appearing to lift him half in the air. Before he could fall, a terrific left had come in, catching him on the point of the right jaw. Then the new sheriff was stepping to his left, giving the big buckaroo room, and Broome came down on his face as if from the blow of a sixteen-pound hammer squarely between his little reddish eyes.

"Damn!" grunted another rider, once he could find his voice. "That was a fast un, fellas! Eck's out cold!"

"YOU can see Judge Bailey about that bail later on, Bellarkin." Cassidy was still as calm as Old Pitt Henshaw might have been when settling a man down, usually with a warp over the head from one of his long-worn Peacemakers. "He's probably already gone up to the church. But we're first going to find out how hard Tip Rett's been hit. If any of the rest of you don't like it," he stepped back a couple of paces, "right now is the time to show your teeth."

"Tough, ain't he?" grunted another rider. "Plumb bad sheriff!"

"Damn 'f he ain't," nodded Bellarkin, backing himself closer to the bar, elbows hooking well over the handrail now. "Say, look, Jim," his tone was suddenly hardening, getting that mean growl, "I wonder how yo'd look bein' rid outa town on a rough pole. Eh, *boy*?"

"We won't go into that right now, Bellarkin." Jim Cassidy grinned at him. "But I will go into something else, if—Easy, *you!*" A pair of long, silver-mounted six-shooters had flashed into his hands, an easy double cross-draw that seemed effortless. A big, red-faced man by the name of Buck Johnson had let his right hand stray to the butt of a Colt. "You don't want to die right fast, do you?"

"Er—why, no!" Johnson's hand was jerking away from the Colt. All of them stared as if this was a man before them they had never seen before. He had always taken the background, quietly watching and waiting until he was needed when Pitt Henshaw was alive, letting the old man do all the talking, men knowing that he was almost sudden death if they reached for a six-shooter. "Eck was my friend, that's all!"

"He can still be, I suppose." Cassidy moved a pace closer. "Just to keep the peace this morning I'll take all your guns."

"Take — take," Old Bull Bellarkin's voice was a startled string of deep-belly grunts, "our guns!"

"You heard me, Bellarkin," nodded the new sheriff. "You're not coming into this town today to raise general hell. One

of your men has done enough as it is—and I know that every last one of you came here for trouble. That one shooting was enough. I'm damned if I'm going to have another one on my hands. Watch, *Johnson!*"

Johnson had let his right hand drop back, close to the butt of the long Colt. Cassidy fired one shot, and the man's arm came up with such a violent jerk it seemed to half-lift him from the floor. The hand was limp, suddenly flapping, blood oozing from his bullet-nicked wrist. He stared at it, eyes growing larger and larger as if he could not believe it, then his terrified howl filled the room.

"Damnit, he shot me!"

"The next one will be through your thick head, Johnson!" snapped the sheriff. "Watch yourself, all of you!"

"Keep yore hands up, fools!" yelled Bellarkin, wildly glancing to his right and left. "This—this crazy young fool'll kill yuh as quick as hell!"

"Unbuckle your belts, and let them drop." The unbelievable coolness had come back to Cassidy's voice. "I don't want to have to kill anybody in this mean lot, but if there's a hand that flashes just one inch beyond the belt buckles, the owner of it will drop with a bullet between the eyes. Better believe me. I'm no man to fool you. *Drop!*"

"Better—better drop for now, boys!" Bellarkin's voice jerked, dark eyes narrowing. "Why—why, I believe the fool can shoot!"

Old Pitt Henshaw could have told them a lot more than that in his time. Jim Cassidy had come riding into Funeral Bend one Tuesday morning two years ago, quiet and unassuming—as a cattle-buyer's scout on the look-out for the best of the spring beef herds. He had left his horse in front of the Funeral River Saloon. At the bar he had startled big old Matt Ferguson half out of his boots by ordering a bottle of strawberry soda-pop—a brand of wet-goods kept on hand for ranchers to take home to their kids.

Pitt Henshaw had been there, pulling himself up at the foot of the bar with a grin. Less than five minutes after that guns had started thundering up the opposite side of the street in front of the little stone bank—the attempt for the first bank robbery in Funeral River in more than twenty years. Right then Jim Cassidy had gone into action with the old sheriff, and without even thinking of what he was doing as they raced out the front doorway. When the smoke cleared away four outlaws were dead in the street, the bags of money dropped, and three more men were down on their knees, begging for their lives.

Afterwards Henshaw had taken the most of the responsibility for those kills, not as a braggard but to shield his younger companion from any fool court troubles. Later Old Pitt had learned that he had teamed up with a former Texas Ranger, and one of the best and fastest shots in the State of Texas.

"An' that won't do yuh good here," had warned the old man. "We've got just too damn many gun-bullies around who's like to pick a quarrel only to try yore speed—like gun-bullies do. Just keep 'er quiet, son. I'll try to see that it don't leak out."

Now he was standing in the old man's boots. Belts and six-shooters were dropping, banging on the iron footrail, big buckles rattling. When the last one dropped Cassidy bent over the now-stirring Eck Broome and whipped his weapons from their holsters, tossing them over the bar, knowing that big old Matt Ferguson would keep his hands off this affair.

"And now," Cassidy straightened, conscious of men ganging up at the front door and windows, faces grim and white, more hell ready to let loose if he did not hurry, "we'll delay the real jail for the time. Get going to that door!" He point-

ed toward the southwest corner of the room where a foot-thick ice house door was set flush with the wall. It was an iron-strapped door leading into a twelve by sixteen-foot room with walls three feet thick, the place where Matt Ferguson kept his stocks of beer and ice.

"Don't stop to argue!" Cassidy's voice was hardening. "Just move! I haven't got all day, but I'll tell you again I'm not going to have a gunfight in Funeral River today—not, at least, until we can show some respect to Pitt Henshaw and get his body in the ground."

"Hell!" groaned Bellarkin. "He—he's gonna put us on ice!"

"I ain't agoin'!" Rube Mann, a six-foot, dark-bearded cowboy just to Bellarkin's left, sawed himself back against the bar. "I ain't hot! I ain't needin' no coolin' off. I—Damnit, look out, fella!"

Another shot had thundered from the long Colt in Jim Cassidy's right hand. The bullet smashed into the floor between Mann's feet, a cloud of splinters flying, the glancing lead crashing on into the bar just below the footrail.

"We've got — got to go, yuh fools!" yowled Bellarkin, shoving his barrel-shaped bulk forward to lead the way. "We ain't in too deep, anyhow. Hell, we can all prove that Tipp Rett stole six hundred dollars from Eck 'fore he skinned out from the Circle Bell, an' that's reason enough to shoot any dirty skunk!"

"Take Eck with you!" Cassidy yelled to make himself heard. "The cooling off will do him good!"

"Shore, now, Eck — Eck's one of my boys!" Bellarkin had jerked to a stop, helping to pick Broome up. Between himself and Rube Mann they staggered him on to the ice box door and threw the latch. Like a string of subdued sheep they filed inside. Cassidy slammed the door on them, then looked back at the white-faced Ferguson, standing there with his eyes popping, his mouth bagged open.

"Bring me the lock and the keys!" he snapped. "You're going to have company for a while whether you like it or not, Matt."

"Damn—'f—it don't look—like it!" gagged the old saloon keeper. "But say, now!" He jerked up a big hand. "They'll drink up all my bottled beer if yuh leave 'em long."

"It'll save you drawing it and charging it," grinned back Cassidy. "Maybe you can close up this dump and go to the funeral, too."

Laughter broke at that moment from the front doorway and the windows and seemed to go spreading like a rousing wind racing across the wide street. Cassidy locked the heavy door. As he snapped the big old lock he listened. The faint sounds coming from the inside were like swarms of bees buzzing angrily inside a thick barrel.

"On the ice!" yelled a voice in the street. "Ol' Bull Bellarkin an' his crew on ice! Maybe there'll be peace for today yet!"

CHAPTER TWO

Marked Man

IT WAS a job now to keep the crowd out. Ferguson had taken the hint about closing up and was hurrying to the back doors, slamming them and placing stout wooden bars across them, fastening them there with iron pins. Cassidy had wheeled away from in front of the ice and beer room, trotting forward to shoo back the pressing mob of humanity. One of the first men he saw was big, blond-headed, stubby-mustached Mike Ringo, his Flying Hatchet riders behind him. Ringo's dander was up, but he could still grin from ear to ear.

"Good place for that bunch!" he commented. "Tip Rett ain't ridin' for me no more, but maybe they thought he was.

I wanted to have a little somethin' to say to Bull Bellarkin an' his crowd, but the gang here sorter kept me 'way from the door. When I got a gander of what was goin' on through the window I couldn't help but start laughin'."

"But," Cassidy was staring across the street, "where's Tip?"

"Up in Doc Bill Taylor Miller's." Ringo jerked his head to indicate the doctor's offices over the little bank. "Hit twice in the chest, once in the shoulder an' a couple through the thighs. They was shootin' to weigh 'im down with lead, all right, but Doc says he'll be mighty apt to bruise it through. Reckon them squirts will die in that ice an' beer room for the want of air."

"They won't!" Old Matt Ferguson answered him, locking the front doors and handing Cassidy the keys. "Air vent'll take care of that. I just look for 'em to drink up all my bottled beer, like I told Jim. But—but, mind yuh, now," he was hastily adding, "I didn't want Jim to go puttin' 'em in there. No, sir! Didn't want it, didn't have ary hand in it, did I, Jim?"

"Your skirts are clear, Matt." Cassidy was quick to agree with him, not wanting later trouble to come crashing down on the old man's head. "If there's any blame I'm the one they'll have to come to. What time is it getting to be?"

"Ten forty by my watch." Ringo had dragged his old silver timepiece from his shirt pocket, glancing at it. "Close to time to be gettin' up yonder on the rise, I reckon. Albright's closin' up." He glanced back across the street. "All dressed an' only has to put his coat an' hat on. Bet it's the first time in ten years he's washed his neck an' combed his hair."

The two other saloons up the street above the bank—The Rocky Mountain and the Old Wyoming—had not opened at all, and it left no place to congregate, stall and drink. And soon after Cassidy left the Funeral River, lines of men were stringing toward the graveyard. The most of them would squat inside the white fence, down on their spurred heels cowboy fashion, and wait for the coffin to be brought out of the church.

Cassidy headed straight for tall and lean old Doc Miller's office. Miller still had Tip Rett on his table. He was just finishing with the last wound in the right thigh, the cowboy lying there stripped from head to heel as pads of gauze were put in place, and was nervously trying to smoke a cigarette Miller had rolled and poked between his lips. As Cassidy stepped into the room he looked up with big eyes as if expecting to be arrested. Something like a groan came from him when he spoke.

"I DIDN'T start that shootin', Sheriff Cassidy!"

"Talk about it later, Rett!" Miller slapped him a little whack on the naked stomach. "Not now. You've lost a lot of blood and—"

"But I'll talk now!" cut in the cowboy. "I say I didn't start that shootin'. I tried to get outa there when they come shovin' in like they owned the town an' wanted to tear it apart. Damnit," something like a sob shook him, "I didn't have a gun! Charley Price in the Wyomin' let me soak it to him for ten dollars two weeks ago. The gun's lyin' there on his back bar.

"Another thing, too." He seemed to be wanting to tell everything in rushes. "I didn't steal no six hundred dollars from Eck Broome. Don't believe Eck ever had that much at one time in his life. I never stole anything from anybody! I ain't no thief! But what could I do? Old Bull took my horse, an' a four hundred dollar saddle with the bridle an' blanket that I won in Wyomin'; an' I had a big gold watch my gran'daddy had left my daddy,

Pa handin' it down to me. He took that an' a big gold ring. Guess they forgot my gun. I never carried it much. Kept it under the straw sacks they call pillows up in the bunkhouse.

"Anyhow," a deep, tired sigh came from him, "they took all the rest I had, meanin' for workin' through the winter when others quit an' sneaked out on Old Bull. He never paid me nothin'. Along with that there was eighty dollars I had. He stole them last winter, one Saturday night when we was in town. They made me take what few clothes I had an' hoof it to town with a tater sack on my back. Kept even my blankets. I sneaked the gun in the sack when they wasn't lookin'.

"Wonder to me I thought of anything up there." A little shiver went over him, from his feet to his throat. "I wasn't in no shape to think. Old Bull had had me pitched belly-down crost a barrel, the gang holdin' me with ropes 'round the wrists an' ankles, an' had damn nigh whipped me to death with a quirt. I couldn't set down good for a month, an' I still get pains in the back of the head where he'd hit me now 'an then with the butt of that quirt. I—"

"And why," Cassidy had to cut in on him, "didn't you come straight to Pitt Henshaw with your story, Rett? You should have done that."

" 'Cause, damnit," frowned the cowboy, "it wouldn't have done me a speck of good, Cassidy! They'll all swear for each other up there, an' I'd only got the worst of it. Bull, they tell me, has a way of accusin' men of things when he owes a lot of money to 'em an' wants to get rid of them without payin' off.

"He run a young fella named Clark Henry off up there just at Christmas time, an' in the worst blizzard yuh ever saw blow. Beat him up, too. Awful, it was. Made me sick. He claimed all of a sudden that Clark was shinin' up too close to his long-shanked young daughter, Hattie.

"Clark, I reckon, never looked twice at the gal. Eck's the boy for her, thick as mud, an' Bull knows it. She gets Eck's money for him, 'cause he spends the most of it on her. Anyhow, Clark went, both eyes closed almost tight, nose knocked 'round toward his right ear. He had an old string-haltered bay that wasn't worth takin'. Saddle was no good either, but Bull made him leave it. The horse come back to the corrals two days later, a good sign that Clark didn't get far.

"Damn 'im, *damn 'im!*" He groaned now. "I'm gonna tell all I know about that crowd when I'm feelin' better." His face had grown frightfully pale. "It'll jar hell outa things 'round here, too, 'cause there's some things I do know, an' know I *know!* Right—right now I feel weak as hell an' kinda sick at the belly. Just remember one thing, though, if I never tell yuh another: That crowd's out to get yuh, an' they ain't alone, Jim Cassidy! Watch yore step. I'm tellin' yuh, gonna die or not, watch yourself. Yo're a marked man!"

"TAKE it easy, Rett." Cassidy put a big hand on the white forehead as he was ready to leave. "Maybe they won't worry me too much when it's all said and done. I think I can take care of myself fairly well."

"So did Pitt Henshaw, but—but," Rett was trying to catch himself up short, "he died just the same. Maybe for a special reason, too, atter his wife was gone. But —but I'm sick now!" He was suddenly chopping himself off from everything. "I reckon I need to sleep."

"I'll put you in a bed in the back room." Miller was spreading a sheet over him. "You're going to be all right, cowboy. Just relax and don't worry about it."

"And I'll come back after the funeral, Rett." Cassidy was turning away. "Won't be too long because I'm late now."

Something made him take a long step to the door to the outer office, pushing it open quickly. A man was standing there, and had probably been peeping through the keyhole while he was listening. The door caught him as he was wheeling, banging into the spurred heel of his right foot, tripping him. A tall, lean fellow with an almost frightfully long, thin neck, he went down to his hands and knees, an old white hat falling off his head and rolling across the floor.

Jim Cassidy did not say a word until after he had acted. He stepped quickly forward, catching the man by the back of the collar of a stout vest of blue and white-dotted calfskin. With a fierce surge he had him on his feet, hurling him in against the wall to his right. The man sprawled there, breathing in gasps, fear in his popping blue eyes.

"Slim Laffetra!" stated the sheriff. "In person! Rider for the Two Twenty Two in Devil Range! And you were doing a little eavesdropping, eh, Slim? Probably hoping to hear something you can hustle to the Circle Bell and—"

"No! No! Not me!" The cowboy jerked up his long, thin paws of hands as if to ward off a punch to the nose. "I—I never tell a thing! Keep my nose outa other people's business!"

"You're a liar, Slim!"

"Now, I ain't, I swear!" Laffetra was lifting his feet, drawing them up as if wanting to hold them in front of his face. "I only come to see Doc. I'm sick, yuh see. Yeah, sick! Kinda all bloated up for days now." He took time to lower one hand and rub his flat stomach. "I figure he can help me. Maybe give me some pills."

"Oh, that was it, a very sick man!" Cassidy turned and looked at the doctor, giving him a wink. "He does look bad, Doc. Very bad. Can you fix him up."

"Sure! In an hour I'll have a new man out of him!" Sudden, all-wicked little lights had come into Miller's eyes. "I know just what Slim needs. Take it easy, cowboy. Don't exert yourself."

HE TURNED and was quickly gone into a small, closet-like room where he kept his drug shelves. In three minutes he was back with a tall, twelve-ounce glass filled to the brim with a hellish, milky-brown liquid. The moment Laffetra saw it he started trying to make himself as small as he could in the chair.

"Just what you need!" smiled the doctor, and there was something like a devil's leer in that smile. "Great stuff!"

"Yuh—gonta put it in a bottle, Doc?"

"Why, hell, no!" The leer on the doctor's face switched to mock surprise. You'll just drink it here!"

"All that!" Laffetra's voice was almost a howl. "What—what'n hell is it? That's the biggest lookin' damn dose of medicine I ever saw for man or animal! Yuh wouldn't need that much to drench a sick hoss dyin' of the botts!"

"I'm the doctor, you're the patient, Slim," smirked the doctor. "Just tilt it up and drink it down without getting your breath. What in hell would you know about it if I told you what it was? Take it!"

"Put it in a bottle, Doc, *please!*" Laffetra's hands were up again. "I'll take it back to the ranch—"

"Drink it here, I said!" Miller was a man with a temper that could fly into a rage as quick as a bull-bat on the wing. "Otherwise, you gander-necked jackass, I'll smash those buck teeth down your skinny throat and make your sharp-nosed face look more like a sick buzzard's than it ever has. Drink, every drop of it!"

"But—but, Doc, I—"

"Drink, *damn* you!"

"Oh, Gawd!" groaned the cowboy, taking the glass. He lifted it, shook as he stared at it, and then was gulping and gagging it down, the full twelve ounces of

the hellish stuff. "It's killin me!" He started twisting in his chair, looking as if trying to twist himself into knots. "Worst stuff I ever tasted. What—what'n hell was it? If it kills me—I—I've got a right to know what I died of!"

"Of course," nodded the doctor, taking the glass, with that mean little devil leer coming back. "It's a nice little formula all of my own, Slim. Basically castor oil and a very strong solution of Epsom, blended with a little crotin, ipecac, sandalwood and balsam. Best remedy I know for eavesdropitis, Slim. And this is the third time in the past month you've been caught listening just outside my door. I don't like it! The next time I catch you I'll triple the dose—if this one doesn't kill you and eliminate the next time. Now get the hell out of here—unless Jim Cassidy wants to lock you up as a peepin' Tom!"

"Lemme go!" gagged the cowboy. A'mighty, fellas, I'm—I'm powerful sick! Feel like I'm gonta die!"

"Then get going!" Cassidy caught him by the shoulder, yanked him to his feet. "Don't hang back too long!"

Slim Laffetra needed no coaxing, no second invitation. As a startled buck would move, hand over his mouth, he snatched up his hat. In what looked like a half-run, half-fall he was at the door leading out on the landing at the head of the stairs. In a desperate rush he flung the door open, then he was on the stairs, falling and running down them. They heard him go whamming out the lower door to the sidewalk with the noise of a runaway mule.

"And that fixes that," nodded Cassidy, turning from a window when he could stop laughing long enough to do anything. "What a dose!"

"Yes, what a dose," chuckled the doctor. "I'm quite certain that Mr. Laffetra will find it unusually interesting."

"But it changes things here, Doc." Cassidy was turning back into the room where Tip Rett was lying on the table. "Slim might have heard more than was good for him, especialy after it reaches Old Bull Bellarkin's hairy ears. Even if I miss all of the sermon and the burial too, we've got to get a stretcher and get Tip up to the jail."

"The *jail!*" Rett tried to rear himself to one elbow, and fell back with a groan. "Good Gawd, Jim, I ain't done nothin' to nobody! Worst I coulda done, I reckon, was to take a job with Old Bull in the first place when I come up this way last year. But I didn't know 'im. Nobody told me what kind of an outfit it was. Folks just got down on me for the company I was in, I guess, but I ain't done nothin'. Hell, Cassidy, I've been on the other end, gettin' the hell of it!"

"And you might get more, Tip." Cassidy put his hand back on the white forehead. "Listen to me. Somebody's apt to do things to you—right fast, too, if they start to get you out of the way. As an excuse for the county feeding you, I'll arrest you for disturbing the peace, a charge that'll never be brought up. You'll be up at the jail, on a good, clean bed in my quarters on top of the jail itself. Doc can come to see you as often as he's needed, and you'll be safe from hard luck from here on out, I hope."

"Say, now, Jim, that ain't bad." Tip Rett was beginning to grin in spite of his pale face. "I was just wonderin' what I was gonna do until I get well enough to work, if I can find a job. Bunged up like I am, it's sorter hard sneakin' into the lofts of barns to sleep like I've been doin' of late. Thanks, Sheriff!"

CHAPTER THREE

Second-Hand News

HE WAS late for the sermon, going up to the flat with Miller in his lopsided buggy. Lean old Frank Wilson, his

deputy, had appeared to take charge of the jail just after Tip Rett had been carried up the street on a stretcher. Rett was now in a comfortable bed in the sheriff's ample quarters of four large rooms and a small kitchen on the roof of the jail, a neat house within itself, erected by Old Pitt Henshaw—out of his own pocket with money earned during the years.

Henshaw's coffin was just being brought out of the church when they pulled up at the white fence. Hardened, red-nosed old cowmen with their big hats in one hand were the pall bearers. The coffin had been closed. There would be no chance to have a last look at the old sheriff, this man who had given so much of himself to the wild Funeral River regions. His body was headed for the ground, and in a few minutes the coffin was being lowered into the rough box in the vault of the grave. Men picked up shovels and spades.

" 'Dust to the dust,' " intoned short, bottle-bellied Isaac Walker, the preacher, stooping to toss in the first clod. "Such is the way of mankind, the way of life."

The shovels and spades were immediately busy. A couple of old cowmen dropped into the grave in their high-heeled boots and Sunday-best clothing to tramp down the earth as it was scooped in.

"And that," half-whispered a girl just behind Cassidy, "marks the end of old Pitt Henshaw."

He turned, hat in hand, and saw her then, a quick smile filling his face as he slightly bowed. It was the tall, golden-haired Lane Ringo, Big Mike's daughter, but there was no chance to talk to her until the grave was filled, mounded and spanked down with shovels. She had a question for him when they walked back to the white fence of the churchyard.

"Who killed him, Jim?"

"Do you think I know yet, Lane?" He looked at her quickly. "I wish I did. Before I'm through I think I will."

"Then—you have some ideas, Jim?"

"Not very good ones," he frowned. "But just between us two—well, there's no proof, no smattering yet, but time will tell. Time generally does, Lane."

"Yes," she nodded, "I know. Time tells a great many things, Jim. But do you know what—well," she was suddenly biting her lip, cutting herself short, "It—doesn't matter. It's a lie, a low, bald-faced, terribly mean lie! All of us know it at the Flying Hatchet."

"All know what, Lane?" He caught her by the wrist. "Never start something without finishing it!"

"THE grapevine, as we call it, has started its old hum, Jim." She was avoiding his stare by looking on across the graveyard, her face set except for the quiver of her lower lip. "But—remember, now!—all of us at the Flying Hatchet know it's a lie!" She looked at him quickly, then back across the graveyard. "There's talk started, Jim, that you possibly killed Pitt Henshaw."

"Me!" His voice was a gasp. Her words had all but staggered him, making his face go white in an instant. "But—but why? He was my friend. Like a father to me."

"To take his job, Jim."

"Good God!" He rocked back against the fence, feeling weak from his toes to the top of his head. "I didn't want to take a deputy job in the first place—"

"I know that, Jim!" She nodded grimly. "I helped talk you into that, when you were happy enough as a cattle-buyer's scout. Dad helped, too, I'm sure. All of us know."

"But who in hell, Lane, is talking this damned lie!" he cried. "Do you know? Does anybody?"

"Certain people, Jim," she smiled half-wearily, "don't want the majority of others to like you. Hating you, everybody I mean, would serve them better. One of the old tricks used by politicians, Jim!

Anything for the advantage!" She stamped a small foot angrily. "Any old mean thing! But—but I hope, Jim, that you'll understand that the Flying Hatchet is behind you, knowing you for what you are. You would have to blow the Music Bells down," she pointed to the great, towering mountain wall to eastward, "to change my Dad and Mom! They're stickers to the last."

"And you're a sticker, too, Lane." He felt himself easing closer to her. "The most wonderful girl I ever knew!"

"You've been a long time in saying that, Jim!" She looked at him with a quick smile. "I—I think you're the nicest man — Oh, thunder, here comes Dad and Mom!"

"Just the same," he half-whispered, fiercely, "I heard what you said. I won't forget. I can't. There's lots and lots to work for now, and some day I'll bring Old Pitt Henshaw's killer or killers in—and hang them higher'n hell!"

"Or dead and roped across a saddle!" Lane Ringo nodded. "Don't forget that I'll be around to do all I can. Hello, Dad!"

"HOWDY, Britches!" Ringo grinned from ear to ear. He was proud of this girl, but he was no more proud of her than the man beside her with a sheriff's star under his coat. "Looks like now we can sorter get ready to pull for home. I've got a great story to tell yuh 'bout Jim an' the way he has of puttin' men on the ice to cool. Thought about it when they was lowerin' Pitt in the ground. Had to turn away to keep from bustin' right out laughin'. That woulda been a hell of a note!"

"I've heard all about Matt Ferguson's ice and beer room, Dad!"

"Well, I'll just be damned!" Ringo snatched off his big hat and vigorously scratched his head. "How'd yuh hear? Who told yuh?"

"Everybody knows about it." She tried to laugh. "Everybody's talking about it. Some think it too good to be true!"

"Well, bust my britches now!" Ringo turned and glared at some of the departing crowd. "I never get to tell somethin' unless it's old an' second-hand!"

HE WAS all himself again in a couple of minutes after they were gone, his eyes following the girl, knowing that one day she would belong to him if he could only fight this thing through. And what did anything else matter? What did it matter what the grapevine was whispering. He had been expecting only the worst of the worst. Certain ones would believe it. Others would stick to him, and others —knowing it all a bald-faced lie—would try to kick over the traces, making great oceans and mountains out of mere puddles and molehills.

For there were men here who would rule or ruin, selling themselves body and soul for power. Old Bull Bellarkin was not the only fly in the honey. Bull Bellarkin did not have sense enough for that! He was simply all bull, a man for smarter men to use, to send charging and pawing into anything, actually able to get along among the rangelands with only those who feared him. When men were afraid it made him feel important, like he was the commander in chief of all the hills and valleys, ruling everything in sight with an iron hand, making the weak shiver in their boots when he roared at them—the Lion of Devil Range, as he sometimes drunkenly referred to himself.

Those who knew better rated Bull Bellarkin as a loud-mouthed bluffer who generally pushed the other fellow out front to do the fighting for him, interested after that only in his man getting away and not getting caught to do a lot of fool talking. Men knew, also, that he could be wheedled into any scheme, decidedly one that promised great and quick riches with small risk to life, limb and hard cash on his own part.

Big Mike Ringo was the dangerous one, the happy-go-luck half-devil, quick to kill or quick to stop, think and compromise even when fighting wild. He had the reputation that branded him as the killer of seven men. Even his enemies said that three of them were out-and-out outlaws, two cattle thieves, and two a pair of born trouble-makers and notorious gun-lawyers who had deliberately snared him into fights, dead-sure killers wanting to further their reputations as killers by beating him on the draw.

It had been Ringo, according to Old Pitt Henshaw, who had had the gall to openly oppose Bellarkin in his first big cattle pool scheme, pointing out that it could end disastrously. Bellarkin had gone ahead with it, bullying and dragging in cattlemen with smaller holdings and not strong enough to fight. He had shipped only a few car loads at first to a couple of supposedly great and wonderful men in Kansas City. Back in a couple of weeks had come certified checks, each for more money than any little-fry cowman had ever hoped to get.

Bull Bellarkin had gone wild with that. Bullying and driving night and day again, he had managed to rake up nearly nine thousand head of the best cattle on the ranges, shipping them as rapidly as he could load the cattle cars in Rambling Bend, sixty miles to southward. More than half of them had been his own, the pick of his herds. In eight weeks he had grown tired of sending red-hot telegrams and getting sugar-coated replies telling him to wait, that the market was low, the boom in buying just around some cock-eyed corner. He had grabbed a morning stage, pulling out for Rambling Bend and Kansas City. Two weeks later he had been wiring the little bank of Funeral Bend money enough to come home on.

"They hooked us, damn 'em!" he had growled the late afternoon he had stepped off the up-country stage. "Fine an' fancy offices closed tighter'n drum-heads. Government fellas was runnin' all over huntin' 'em, an' them long-gone on their way to South America or some other furrin' parts of the world. I was told that they hooked cowmen clear hell from the Canada line to southwest Texas. One fella said they'd took in more'n a million dollars 'fore the government stepped in. I'm damn lucky, I reckon, that I was able to get home, havin' a little money left here in the bank an' some few cows on the range. No more cattle pools for me. Not unless Bellarkin, *'imself,* runs 'em!"

Stung to the bone once, no one had wanted any more parts in his get-rich-quick pools. Only by bullying, threatening and having men beaten to pulps had he managed to form others down through the years. Some had paid a little more than the cattle-buyers who came through the country almost every spring and fall, some with scouts already having sent their reports on the condition of the local herds. The rest of his pools had flopped. Miller spoke of him now.

"A super-egotist," he commented as he drove the black horses back toward town. "A big-headed, know-it-all adolescent yet despite his sixty-odd years. Bull simply never grew up, and he gets worse as he gets older. There's no cure for his kind."

"Maybe Bull will have a little of that cooled out of him today!"

"In that ice box?" Miller looked at him with a quick little grin. "Nope. Ain't enough ice this side of Hell, itself, to cool the fool—not for long! He'll probably come out of there like a roaring lion with his men all geared up to start a fight as soon as they can get guns in their hands."

THE noise of guns came as if answering him at that moment. A sudden crashing, wailing, shrieking and crying filled the air around them. It was a hail of bullets, nothing short of it. The old buggy had just dipped across a wide, shallow

ravine half-way back to the jail. The shots were coming from a dense little thicket of jackpines hugging the slopes of the big flat above the head of the town.

Bullets seemed everywhere, in the air within inches of them, one smacking into the back-rest just behind Miller's right shoulder. Another plowed into the seat itself, lifting a long, rope-like welt in the old leather under the doctor. Two others ripped into the bed of the buggy, one tearing through an old black medicine bag in the compartment just behind the seat. Others wailed over the horses, some whipping up little spurts of dust under their feet, startling them into snorting and rearing fools. In all the noise a woman screamed somewhere in the distance; a man bawled an order to her:

"Hit ground, Annie, hit ground!"

"Damn!" yelled the doctor, giving his long lines a furious shake, slashing at the same time with his buggy whip. "Get going, horses! Get going! Don't stand and paw the air."

Another burst came tearing down on them, worse than the first. Both horses reared, bawling at the same instant. The off-horse fell to his knees as his forefeet came down. The near-horse tried to plunge on, tearing himself half-out of the harness before he sprawled over on his left side. The buggy slammed on into them, the tongue breaking, snapping like chalk. The buggy bounced high in the air like a bucking, end-swapping bronc under a saddle for the first time, and came down headed back toward the graveyard before it flopped crazily over on its side, a rear wheel breaking into splinters. The dust was a blinding, suffocating cloud. In the cloud lifted the doctor's voice, sounding like the wailing of a lost soul!

"God A'mighty, what a hell of a mess! Where are you, Jim? Hurt?"

"Scared worse, I think." Cassidy was finding himself tangled in the low limbs of a little pine a dozen feet from the overturned buggy. "Feel like I've been shot out of the barrel of a gun! How're you, Doc?"

"Just fine, can't kick," muttered the doctor, on his feet now and awkwardly trying to paw dust from his eyes, nose and mouth. "What'n hell happened? Somebody was shooting at us, I think!"

"And plenty!" nodded Cassidy, trying to peer through the dust toward the slope. "Both horses are down. One's dead, I think. The other's still kicking. I'm hurrying on to the jail for a rifle, Doc. Here comes some of the crowd from the graveyard. They'll give you a hand."

He was limping away then, trying to run. A blow somewhere had caught him on the left knee and shin, making his entire leg a dead club under him, his right foot flapping like a loose hinge. Before he could get completely out of the cloud of dust a tall claybank mare had come lunging up to a halt beside him, a quick hand reaching down to grab him by the shoulder.

"Jim!" cried a voice. "You're hurt!"

"Lane!" He looked up at her with a little start that quickly turned to a grin. "I—I thought you came in a buckboard!"

"I came on Cannon Ball!" She was on the ground beside him now with a quick leap from the saddle. "Mom and other women used the buckboard. Take Cannon Ball! There's a rifle on the saddle!"

She swung the mare around with her right side to him, and helped him up with that half-dead leg. By this time six more men on horses were pounding up, having wheeled down off the rise where they had been hanging back to gossip at the graveyard. In a running, zig-zagging line they headed out for the slopes of the rise behind the jail, Cassidy leading them. It seemed only a minute before they were crashing into the low pines, making the limbs snap and pop.

"Gone!" yelled one of the riders.

It was no more than Cassidy had expected. He rode on to the other edge of the pines, quickly pulling up. The country directly below him and across a shallow ford of the curving river was broken as though a terrific earthquake had cracked it apart at some time in the far past. Great ravines, coulees, draws and gorges branched away as the blades of a huge, ragged fan. He caught just a glimpse of one fleeing rider, the flash of a pale-tan buckskin jacket, the blazing-green sleeves of a fancy cowboy shirt and the top of a big white hat, and grimly nodded as old Riley Loftt, a gray-bearded cattleman from down the valley spoke:

"That was that meddlin' young Clint Sneed of the Two Twenty Two, Jim! I'd know his get-up anywhere!"

"Keep it to yourself, Riley." Cassidy fired him a quick, silencing glance. "I can jail him the next time I see 'im!"

"But there was a lot more'n just him in that shootin', Jim!"

"Of course, Riley!" Cassidy was rubbing his knee, feeling beginning to return to it. "Maybe seven or eight. But they scattered, and only a fool would try to follow them now. That's probably what they want us to do. Let's take a look at the places where they were firing from. The shells they left behind from their guns might be interesting."

"More'n them on my mind," smirked Loftt, "is Ol' Bull Bellarkin an' his bunch now. Wonder if they're still in that ice room?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Hole-Card

LITTLE group still behind him, he stopped on the steps of the porch of the jail. A close look down the street told him that all the Circle Bell horses were still at the hitchrack in front of the Funeral River Saloon. Not yet worrying about Bull Bellarkin catching his death from cold, he started on, stopping when he heard quick hoofs banging to eastward and saw more riders coming.

Mike Ringo had heard the shooting and had wheeled back to town in the saddle of a tall, star-faced roan. Lane was up behind him, and trailing him were four of his best men—old Ben Marlin, his cowboss, tall, hook-nosed Sam McGee, big Joe Stoutt and Denver Frank Smtih, all a level-headed lot in a pinch.

"Just had to turn back, Jim," explained Ringo when he lunged up, letting his daughter slip to the ground before he swung out of his big saddle. "It ain't right to see yuh try to carry the whole world on just one pair of shoulders when the goin' gets as tough as it's gettin'."

"An' wait, now, 'fore yuh answer me too quick!" He jerked up a big, rough hand. "Ever'body knows how the Flyin' Hatchet stands agin Bull Bellarkin an' them what stand with Bull to take his orders. I figure it don't make no difference who stands with yuh. This is just as much my country as it is Old Bull Bellarkin's. These are my best men. Want me an' them?"

"Take them on, Jim!" Lane Ringo had come running on up the steps, catching him by the arm, big blue eyes sparkling as she looked straight into his eyes. "You're alone against the world in this, Jim! You need them and won't regret it. And—and," she was hastily adding, "it will go far to keep down a general fight breaking out in this entire country. The very thing Bellarkin has been trying to start for years!"

"But why in the hell *why!*" Desperation was in Cassidy's face for a second. "A war does no man any good. All of us know that!"

"Hold, Jim, hold." Ringo had dropped reins and come on up on the porch, big rowels dragging. "There's fools who allus think war pays in the end. Here, there's

a reason. For years now there's been sly whispers of sheep outfits comin' to Funeral River Valley. The man who could fix it for them to come would wake up some fine mornin' an' find that he'd got 'imself hawg-rich overnight. Leastwise that's what a damned old fool like Bull Bellarkin thinks."

"Sheep?" Cassidy rolled the word on his tongue. "But this is a cow country, solidly, whole-heartedly!"

"Listen to me, Jim." Lane had let her hand slip downward into his hand. "Almost every sheep range today was once a cattle range, *solidly, whole-heartedly.* Sheep in the valley would mean little or no harm at all to Bull Bellarkin's Circle Bell rangelands."

"Not," put in Ringo with a grin, "when he's already got 'em in Lost Wagon Train Valley as yuh know, Jim. An' there's some men who'll swear that Bull Bellarkin owns some of them herds of walkin' an' bleatin' wool. I, for one, don't put nothin' past 'im. He can get all the backin' he wants from old Tupper McCloud in the State Bank of Ramblin' Bend. Hell, that's a sheepman's bank, out an' out, it is, an' Bull does the most of his bankin' there."

"Come on inside, Dad!" The girl was suddenly looping her left arm into Cassidy's right, giving him a pull. "Let all the others follow who are on Jim Cassidy's side! It's the quick way to win, Jim. The only way to end all of this in a hurry!"

"All right, come!" He had suddenly made up his mind, never going to let anything stand between him and this girl. "It's pitting one side against the other, but I've seen it done before, down on the old Rio Grande and the Pecos. As we say in Texas, it's shooting the works. So —we'll shoot!"

He led the way inside, swinging to the right to mount the stairs to the office of the jail. At the head of them they had to wait for Frank Wilson to open the carefully locked and bolted thick door. Cassidy saw that the old man's face was pale and grim.

"Glad—glad yuh got back, Jim," stammered the deputy. "When all that shootin' was goin' on up there on the slopes a whole hell of a mess of bullets come smackin' through the window at the head of Tip Rett's bed. He flopped off an' under just in time to keep 'imself from bein' killed. He wants to see yuh as quick as yuh come in."

Cassidy hurried on upstairs now. He passed through the big living room on top of the jail and walked into a rear bedroom. Tip Rett was still off the bullet-riddled bed. Rolled in blankets, a pillow under his head, he was stretched out against the wall below the windows.

"Bull said he'd see that my light was put out!" The cowboy was still shaking. "If I hung 'round these parts, he said! Woulda killed me up at the ranch instead of just robbin' me an' runnin' me off if he'd suspected I'd found out a lot of things while ridin' for 'im. I aim to spill it now. He had Pitt Henshaw killed, Jim!"

"But—how could you know that?" Cassidy's eyes had widened. "You haven't been around the Circle Bell for weeks on end—"

"But I know, Jim!" A thin smile moved the cowboy's lips into a little leer. " 'Cause I shot birds, rabbits, wild duck an' geese in the fall an' such with the same gun that killed Old Pitt. Lis'en now: Yuh ain't forgot them empty shotgun shells yuh brought in from the side of the trail. Maybe yuh sorter remember me easin' up to the side of the desk to look at 'em close. I knowed them right away, an' I overheard talk before when nobody knowed I was listenin'. I heard Bull Bellarkin say that Pitt Henshaw had to be put outa the way.

"Know why I know them shells?" The little leer became a small, pain-fed laugh. "I can tell yuh, an' let yuh prove it to

yoreself. An old pump-gun fired 'em, not a double-barrel as some woulda had it. Each time that gun's fired it punches a hole in the end of the shell where the firin' pin strikes. That's 'cause somebody broke the pin. A nail was filed down to take its place. Then there's the extractor. It cuts the rim of the shells 'cause some knucklehead filed it too sharp when it wouldn't drag the shell now an' then. The nail makes a three-cornered break, an' I'll bet I can go find shells where I fired 'em. But get that pump-gun, an' you're close to Old Pitt's killer. He'll either be Eck Broome or Clint Sneed of the Two Twenty Two. Clint's rushin' Estelle, Bull's black-haired gal.

"Go on, Tip!" Eagerly now, Cassidy pulled up a chair, lighted a cigarette, and placed it between the cowboy's lips. "You're handing me something on a silver platter."

"An' can hand yuh more, Jim, now that yo're tryin' to treat me like a white man instead of a yaller dog." Rett took a deep pull at the cigarette, eyes on the ceiling. "I heard Bull an' his wife quarrelin' one night. She told him why he was afraid of Pitt Henshaw an' allus quited down like a good dog when Old Pitt pointed a finger at 'im.

"But—but maybe I shouldn't tell yuh that, Jim." Rett closed his eyes for a couple of seconds. "Still, though, yo're bein' good to me, an' I ain't got no cause not to shelter Big Mike Ringo. I know how yuh feel toward his gal."

"Go on, Tip," urged Cassidy, gently. "Shield nobody when you start, not even me if you have a chance to sometime. Start out and tell the truth—and only the truth."

"WELL, it seems like years ago when Ringo an' Bull was sorter close as friends they caught a fella in Lost Wagon Train Valley an' hung 'im to a limb, thinkin' he was a hoss thief they was after. Later it was clear that he was a sky-pilot. an' hell was to pay, but Bull an' Ringo kept quiet, not sayin' they'd caught anybody in the valley. Old Pitt somehow knowed better, called it a fair-honest mistake three or four years after the hangin' —when he found out all about it, I mean. He just held it as a sort of a club over Bull."

"That's hard to believe, Tip." Cassidy's face had gone white.

"But it's true, Jim!" Lane Ringo answered him turning him in his chair with a jerk. He saw her right behind her father, slowly pushing him into the room. "Mom knew about it, and what Mom knows I know. Dad's wanted to clear that mistake for years. Now's the time, Dad You can tell it, and with all the witnesses gone they can't prosecute you. *They can't make you testify against yourself!*"

"An' Bull Bellarkin wouldn't dare!" nodded Ringo, grimly. " 'Cause Bull an' his bunch had that man hung when me an' my crowd rode up. The horse had just been laid from under 'im."

"Then—you didn't hang him!" cried Cassidy, leaping to his feet. "You've always been in the clear of that!"

"Yeah, I sorter think so myself, Jim." Ringo stared at the floor. "But me an' Bull was after the same man, makin' the same mistake. Me an' my bunch was runnin' 'im down the valley. Bull an' his men was comin' up. Honest when I say it, I aimed to bring 'im in to jail, but we lost 'im among the rimrocks. Bull caught 'im. Allus bein' fast, he had him swung by the time I got there, an' there was a dark-blue knot swellin' out on his neck as big as yore fist, showin' that the neck was already broke, Jim. I—I just had to keep my mouth shut. Yuh do that, yuh know, when yo're out with a fella, both tryin' to do the same thing. Pitt said I could be called as guilty as Bull for not tellin', but he allus kept the tale a secret. I—"

A wild burst of shots and yells down

the street stopped him short. Cassidy rushed forward, out into the big living room with windows overlooking the street. He was just in time to see a small cloud of horsemen tear away from in front of the Funeral River Saloon and go racing down the street, every man with a six-shooter blazing right and left in each hand, splattering lead in all directions.

"And now," he nodded, "it looks like the Bellarkin crowd has been released from the cooler and quits town in a burst of noise!"

"Yep," nodded Ringo just behind him, "looks like the Bull's loose agin, Jim. But—now that yuh know 'bout that thing in Lost Wagon Train Valley, just what'n hell are yuh gonna do with me?"

"Take you downstairs and give you a badge!" Cassidy turned and faced him with something akin to a smile. "From now on you can be a mighty strong hole-card, Mike. There!" He thrust out his hand. *"Shake!"*

"Jim! *Jim!"* cried the girl, eyes suddenly sparkling with tears as she threw herself forward, her arms going up and around his neck. "This—this is going to fix everything—*everything, Jim!"*

CHAPTER FIVE

The Bull Rides Homeward

SLIM LAFFETRA had considered himself the hero of the hour. He had been a very sick, very weak man when he half-crawled out of the brush-choked ravine above the river behind Tom McCue's old saddle shop on the west side of the street. With no one around, he had found an old ladder and a wrecking bar, and had climbed to the roof of the Funeral River Saloon. A cracked-open skylight above the bar had let him through, long figure stretching down. Doc Miller's ungodly mess was still making him feel as if his stomach was a rolling mass filled with flying birds. But it did not prevent him from noticing that the cash drawer in the old back bar was open almost an inch. He opened it the rest of the way, and eighty-odd dollars quietly changed ownership, then he was hurrying out from behind the bar and going to the door of the ice and beer room. A minute's work with the wrecking bar, and the hasp holding the big lock was broken. When he opened the door a shivering, whisper-chattering Old Bull Bellarkin had come blundering back to the world, his Circle Bell riders behind him.

"D-d-d-damn!" he chattered. "B-b-b-eer only ma-ma-kes yuh colder! S-s-s-set o-o-out whisk-whiskey!"

"Ol' True-blue Slim couldn't let yuh down, pal!" had grinned the scarecrow cowboy. "Just ain't in my heart to forget a pal in trouble. Doc Miller pizened me, but I come, true-blue Slim!"

"Shu-shu-tup!" chattered on Bellarkin. "Shump-shump 'hind bar an' shet-shet out whisk-whiskey!"

"Shore! shore! Anything for my pals!" Laffetra had hopped the bar like a goat, setting out bottles and glasses as rapidly as he could. Not a man touched the glasses. They wrung out the corks with trembling hands, and it had been bottles up, the whiskey spilling down cold throats as so much water for men dying of a thirst.

"Now, by damn, that's better!" Bull Bellarkin's voice had finally come back to him. "Jump the bar, one of yuh fellas, an' find our guns!"

"Hold it, pal!" Laffetra had yanked up a skinny talon hand. "Let ol' true-blue Slim get 'em for yuh!"

"Lis'en, *damn* yuh!" roared the old man, banging the bar with his fist. "I'm gettin' a little sick of yore whine! I don't like that *'pal'* business! Too much like the bleat of a goat or a sheep, an' I never heard it fall from a man's mouth who yuh could let yorself trust a yard. Take

a bottle of whiskey if yuh want it an' get the hell outa here. We don't need yuh any more."

"Don't run 'im off now, Bull!" Eck Broome caught the old man by the arm just when it looked as if Bellarkin was ready to hurl a bottle at Slim's sharp-nosed face. "We need all the men we can get now!"

"What'n hell good would Slim be? Him an' his *'pal'* business!"

"Well—well," stammered the big bronc-buster, "as ghostish as he looks he might be used to ha'nt somebody's house!"

Shortly after that, everybody laughing and making fun of him, Slim Laffetra had removed the wooden bars from the rear doors, slipping away from them, better off in worldly goods by eighty-odd dollars in his pocket, four bottles of whiskey inside his shirt and a couple more in the legs of his blue denim pants.

Bull Bellarkin had taken his time, going to shoot hell outa the next damn' boy sheriff who tried to gun-rod him into an ice box! Every belt and six-shooter had been recovered, the weapons back at the hips where they belonged.

"An' who'n hell's gonna pay for the beer an' this whiskey?" he had once grinned. "That's more'n I know or care, I reckon! But out some of them good seegars, Eck. An' ever'body can put a few plugs of that good chawin' tobacco in his pockets for me. Hell, ever'thing's free!"

"Maybe there's cash in the drawer, Bull. Take it, too?"

"A'mighty, no!" Bellarkin had glared, whamming the bar once more with his fist. "Hell, Eck, do yuh think we're thieves?"

"Just hoss an' cow-thieves!" had grinned back the big bronc-twister as he stood more bottles on the bar. "Never anything littler, Bull!"

The far-thundering and crashing reports of shots above the head of the street had started breaking it up. Not long afterwards—every bosom bulging, three men carrying sacks filled with more bottles, boxes of cigars, chewin' an' smokin' —they were turning the snap lock's bolt on the front doors and making a dash for it.

"An' give the boy sheriff a gun-bust he won't soon forget!" had ordered Bellarkin. "Tear hell outa things in good ol'-fashion cowboy style—like the Texans used to do after gettin' in with trail herds 'fore we had so much law in this fool country!"

IT HAD been worse than that when they made the dash, scaring horses at hitch-racks, starting a runaway here and there. Still shooting like wild men when they crossed the wagon bridge, the old planking booming from the pounding hoofs, they had swerved westward, making women scream and children howl in the camps under the trees.

Now, nearly three miles west of town, Bellarkin had cooled down, only chuckles coming from him. He led the way in behind a big rimrocked rise, and swung back to the top of it, tall, thick pines hiding them as he pulled to a halt.

"That's what's knowed," he grinned, pawing inside his bosom for a bottle, "as expressin' yore sentiments. Tellin' 'em where the monkey hid the razor! Scared the whole town half to death, I'll bet. Seems I can still hear them wimmin screamin' an' the kids hollerin' in them wagon camps below the bridge."

"An' what'n hell good," wanted to know Eck Broome, "is it gonna do in the end, Bull?"

"Plenty!" The old man hauled out a bottle and took a long drink. "Yuh boys know I trust yuh. Yuh know what's comin' tonight. There's gonna be lights in this ol' valley, plenty of 'em, an' it won't be moonlight. Haystacks burn purty in the dark. They mean terror to some, an' terror's what we want. Them wimmin, now, won't get through bein' scared

for a week, an' once yuh get folks scared yo've got 'em."

"Maybe so, yeah." Broome was taking himself a drink now. "When 'specially yuh wanta see sheep pourin' into a cow country. But as a cowboy an' a bronc-scratcher, I still say the damn things plain *stink!*"

"Even money does—at times!" nodded the old man, still staring back at Funeral River. "I once had some what come off a dead outlaw who'd been lyin' on a hillside for weeks. Aired under a hot sun for a few days an'—well, it bought me a nice herd of cows same as any other money woulda bought 'em!

"But," he shook back his great lumps of shoulders, "let's ride on, boys. There's a powerful, powerful lot to do 'fore we see another sunrise. Yes, sir!"

"An' some," scowled Broome, always the skeptical one, "may not see another'n. I still say I *don't like sheep!*"

"JIM CASSIDY just ain't got no guts!" It seemed that the most of the men in town were pounding the bars and saying that long before nightfall. "He let Bull Bellarkin' an' his crowd come stormin' in. They as good as robbed the Funeral River, an' blowed out of town like a cyclone shootin' up ever' damn thing in sight. An' still our *boy* sheriff sets up there at the jail, not doin' a thing!"

Even Big Mike Ringo and his men had left him in what a couple of men described as a hell of a huff. The girl had swung into her Cannon Ball's saddle as mad as a blind rattler and had gone galloping away in a cloud of dust toward the Flying Hatchet.

Gradually the most of the crowds in Funeral River had melted away. In the late afternoon smoke had been seen lifting from several places west of the river. By nightfall itself reports of terrific fights here and there at the little-fry ranches were coming in, and yet Cassidy hugged the jail like a lost sheep not knowing where to go or what to do!

Darkness finally hid things except for a lone lamp burning up there at the head of the street. Old Frank Wilson had gone home. Ringo had remained in town until after sundown, his men drifting out long before. Had there been sharper eyes, men who grumbled the most would have noticed that Ringo had been talking to men here and there all afternoon. After he had finished, those men were drifting out of town. Later they might have been seen clattering along at a good clip, each making his own bee-line for certain objectives.

Now, night thoroughly settled, Mike Ringo and nine men were back. Leaving their horses behind them hidden in the pines on the slope behind the court house, five of the men behind him, he came slipping through the little barn and corral. Like a shadow he faded into a rear doorway, the men stringing in behind him. Ten minutes later he was leaving with Jim Cassidy just ahead of him, the five men left behind to watch the jail in case some gang came in to burn the court house down.

"An' that's in the cards," had warned Tip Rett, talking more and more with good food in his stomach, a good shot of whiskey to warm him, and a good bed under him. "I heard a lot up there that I was afraid to tell 'til now, Jim. They had me scared, an' I was allus listenin' at ever' chance I got."

Up on the slope they strung out. Ringo rode just to Cassidy's left. Behind them in single file trailed old Ben Marlin, the cow-boss, hook-nosed Sam McGee, big Joe Stoutt and Denver Frank Smith. Guarding every move, they swung across the river well above the regular ford, and were soon fading into the coulees leading westward.

"Gunfire an' blazin' light there, Jim!"

Ringo stood in his boxed stirrups when they came to the head of a coulee six miles west of the river, his big hand pointing. "At the Double L. Hay's burnin' in spite of how I warned ol' Johnny Pender."

They were riding into it fifteen minutes later, swinging up out of the darkness, each man with a long-barreled shotgun loaded with buck, as well as carrying a rifle to go with his six-shooters. Swinging in close enough, they spilled out of their saddles, slipping forward into a little fringe of low pines. In a minute they were watching a dozen men riding like Indians around the Double L's big log house, pouring rolling blast after blast of gunfire into it while a weak fire from a window here and there tried to keep them off.

"Pick yore men, boys," low-growled Ringo. "Me'n Jim'll take the first four in the lead. Make 'em know shotguns from hell are rakin' 'em from them saddles. Set? Ready?"

"Set an' ready," half-whispered back old Ben Marlin's voice. "Been that way since we left town!"

A minute later it was a staggering roar, men rocking in the saddles of running horses, two men spilling backward over their animals' bounding rumps, others curving to one side, here and there a man crying out in pain and terror—a thundering wipe-out that had struck like lightning, two horses having gone down in the terrible fire.

Now Mike Ringo dropped his shotgun, came up to his knees, cupping his hands around his mouth. The exact sounds of a hooting owl came out of his mouth, a wild, half-cheering yell staggering back to him from the house.

"I'M TELLIN' yuh, Bull, *I'm tellin' yuh!*" Eck Broome's voice was like a terror-stricken woman's in the big log and stone living room of the Circle Bell at midnight. "Yuh talked too much with yore damned ol' mouth! We rammed straight—straight," he staggered, bloody left arm thrust far inside the bosom of his shirt to hold it up, a limp in his left leg, "into blazin' hells of guns ever'where we hit! Ever'body seemed to know we was comin' tonight! They knocked off eight of the boys at the Double L, killin' 'em outright, the others bad hit! At the Double Star Cross it was the same thing! Same at the Triple Rafter, the ol' F J, the Circle Diamond an' the Runnin' U. It was at the Runnin' U that they downed that duded up, simple-minded smart-Alec Clint Sneed. I was down in a wash, an' I heard 'im openin' up, bellowin' like a dyin' yearlin'. *He told 'em yuh an' me killed Pitt Henshaw!*"

Holding himself until now, Old Bull Bellarkin came out of his chair as a huge, startled bullfrog would jump, his mouth flying open, eyes bulging as if about to pop from their sockets.

"No!" he howled, voice hard to make behave. "It—it was, Clint Sneed an'—an' *Buck Johnson!*"

"Yo're a liar!" The red-faced Johnson had suddenly come like a crash into the door from the wide west porch where guards were strung all around the house. "Don't try to put that on me!"

"My—my mistake!" gasped Bellarkin. "I meant—meant *Rube Mann* instead of yuh, Buck!"

"Another lie an' a damned one!" The six-foot, dark-bearded Mann had popped inside, others out there forgetting their jobs and crowding in behind him. "Why'n hell don't yuh admit it was yuh an' Eck an' that jackass Sneed! Yuh knowed Ol' Pitt went to Timberline, knowed he was goin' two or three days before. Yuh—"

"Shut yore fool mouth!" roared Bellarkiln, in a trap here and trying to bellow himself out of it. "Maybe—it was one of the other boys!"

"Don't say it was me!" Seven more

men were pouring into the room now, leaving no guards at all outside. "None of us done it, Bull! We ain't takin' the blame. *Yuh* an' *Eck* an' *Clint* done it!"

It was a terrible row that threatened to break into gunfire for the next ten minutes. Bellarkin's wife and two daughters came into it, half-dressed from their bedrooms. Screaming fits filled the room from time to time, the long-shanked, red-haired Hattie screeching on Eck Broome's side, the dark-haired, raw-boned Estelle going into a rage and out-cursing them all each time Clint Sneed's name was mentioned.

"You old devil, you!" screamed the girl. "You old *devil*! Don't you once try sendin' my man to a rope! I'm goin' to marry Clint!"

"Maybe we'll hold the wedding in jail!"

"Huh!" Everybody turned, eyes popping. In the doorway leading into the kitchen stood a tall man with a pair of cocked .45's in his hand. Bellarkin' croaked after staring for almost ten seconds. "Damnit, it—it's that fool sheriff!"

"An' *Mister Mike Ringo,* if nobody else'll notice!" put in another voice in the doorway at the north end of the room, one that led into a hall going back between the bedrooms. "Been a long time since I come to this dump of yores, Bull. I—"

"Don't do it, Bellarkin!" Cassidy yelled now as he saw the old man sweep up his hand, intending to knock the big lamp from the table and turn the room into darkness. "Don't!"

A shot thundered from the sheriff's right hand now. Bellarkin yelled and dropped back into a chair, right arm spilling blood from the elbow that looked like a broken wing.

"I—I'm shot!" he croaked in a small, thin voice. "He—he shot me in—in my own house!"

"Reach—or die, the rest of yuh!" bawled Ringo. "Look at the *front door* an' *them windows!* Yo're covered!"

"You can't fight women, damn you!" The big, raw-boned Estelle was making a crazy rush toward Cassidy, Hattie wheeling to follow her. "I'll claw them eyes out of your head!"

"Let me handle it, Jim!" Lane Ringo was suddenly pushing past the sheriff, a heavy Spanish quirt in her hand, the butt downward. "Women can fight women, I guess. Back up, you hussies!"

She swung the quirt. It caught Estelle on the side of the head, knocking her sprawling. Hattie screamed and surged back, the fight suddenly ended.

"Reach!" yelled Ringo again. "Ever'body or we start shootin'!"

"Do what—what he tells yuh!" wailed Bellarkin, left hand popping up. "Can't lift my right! This Cassidy fool an' Mike Ringo'll kill us all. Look at them faces an' guns in the doorway!"

They were tying or hand-cuffing every man on the ranch into a saddle a few minutes later.

"And how in the devil," Cassidy was finally getting a chance to ask as they were stringing off the rim with their prisoners, "did you get here, Lane?"

"Woman's intuition or foresight!" She looked at him and laughed. "I had a terrible time trailing you and Dad, but I managed it. I knew there would be women here. Like the dark-haired one said, men just can't do a real job when it comes to fighting women."

"Lane!" He swung closer, throwing his arms around her, pulling her half-out of her saddle, not caring who might see him now. "You belong to a sheriff! Only one in a thousand could find a wife like you're going to be! Kiss me, damnit! What do we care now!"

"Care!" she cried. "Why—why, Jim, I'll sing it to the hills! Go ahead, *boy sheriff!"*

THE END

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(Continued from page 32)

"You don't really mean that!" Ella said.

She looked pretty by evening sun with her white skin and her copper-colored hair. And she set her horse well enough despite her stiff-spined English style of riding.

"Sure I do," he growled.

She eased up until one small boot toe almost touched his. She looked up at him and smiled. A thoughtful smile. He sensed what she was thinking about. About that night when they were alone together in the Conestoga.

He said, "I'd make a hell of a man for you compared with Ken Roos."

"I don't know," she said softly.

"I never stay anywhere more'n a year at a time. Couldn't ever tell when I'd saddle and drift. The long ride, stars for a tent top, and meat off the prairie. I don't think you'd hanker for it."

"There's a time when everyone wants some home besides that thing you call your plunderbag."

He looked at her with a smile softening the hard lines that weather had stamped.

"Maybe. Anyhow, I guess it's time for me to ride."

"You want to give Ken his chance!"

He said softly, "I couldn't do anything else."

"When you get tired of that Montana trail, you might ride back this way!"

"You mean you'll be waiting?"

She didn't answer. With an abrupt movement, she pulled her horse around. For an instant, before the animal broke to a gallop, he looked in her eyes. A promise was there—a promise that would stay with him across the cold miles of the north trail, through the land of the Blackfeet, to the Montana camps of steamboats and gold, and perhaps draw him back to the Sweetwater, and some home more substantial than his plunderbag.

THE END

(Continued from page 63)

"Maybe, like you say, I'm not very bright sometimes," Brasada admitted. "Joley, what're you going to do now?" They were guiding him through the jail rear door and on through into the sheriff's office.

"Me?" said Joley, sinking into his battered swivel chair. "I'll just sit here an' take it easy, an' get things done. Sid, you better go get Doc Aulick here. Andy, you could borry a team an' buggy at the livery. Jean, how 'bout lighting a fire an' boiling up some coffee?"

"Wouldn't you like me to lock m'self up in a cell for you?" Brasada asked, leaning back painfully on the bench.

Joley shook his head solemnly. "Then I'd have to feed you. Anyhow, I don't know where I'd locate witnesses now to who shot Labaucher an' Tad Toole. An' if there's any charge against you here, from six years ago, I sure can't find the record. Maybe Britt Longwill—uh—mislaid it when he was sheriff. Find the coffee, Jean?"

"Yes, I've got it."

"Good." The sheriff's voice seemed to recede into distance. Brasada had to force himself to listen, while watching Jean. "When it gets light," the sheriff said drowsily, "You an' Sid an' your pa can start back. Take that banged-up Brasada hombre with you. Take him to the Bar T an' show him what he's got to live for." He yawned, and tipped his hat over his eyes. "Don't wake me up when you go out."

"Sure," Brasada heard Jean say. She had straightened up from the sheriff's old cookstove, and was gazing at him over her shoulder. She looked all fire and pepper, like a fine young pony, and gentle in the right hands.

"Sure," she said softly. "We'll take him home!"

THE END

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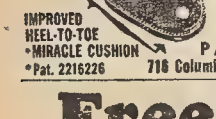

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(Continued from page 91)

in keeping the homesteaders out of Jubilo. But if they all fight like this one did—and if they have men like you to back them, Hilton!—then I guess we better tell them to come ahead. At that, there ought to be room for all of us. They can start by filling up what was Bannion's graze!"

Clem Meek and Bert Wagner—the rest of the town council—came toward them, and Clem had the badge he'd taken from the shirtfront of the dead Hack Cordry. He held it out to Dan, who looked at it and at Oliver James.

The mayor nodded weakly. "Put it on, will you, Dan? Jubilo still needs you. And I hope you don't hold any grudges —that everything can be the same as it was before."

"I'm afraid it can't be the same." That was Dorothy James, speaking slowly as her gaze held fixedly on Dan. "I'm afraid we aren't good enough for Dan, you and I. We had our chance, and wasted it. And now I have an idea he's found what —what he really wants—"

Hilton took the badge, almost automatically; but his eyes were on the girl's, seeing the sad smile of regret there, and marveling at her understanding. He would never know how she had come to see, so quickly, what it was that had started him today on this road of rebellion against the habits and loyalties of the past. But she knew—and Dan was suddenly grateful for her not trying to hold him now, for her willingness to let him go.

It was with a full heart that he went across the square once more to the wagon camp, where the town's doctor had just finished binding up Mike O'Leary's wounded shoulder, and the homesteader's family was already at work busily putting things to rights. And where the warm smile of Beth, greeting Dan Hilton, was like a fulfillment and a promise.

THE END

HENRY'S RED-EYED MONSTER

(Continued from page 74)

beautifully and it opened my eyes." She glanced down at the unconscious Doc, making a bitter little grimace. "But it seems a shame, after you'd been away from drinking so long, to go back to it for my sake."

"I'm not back to it, honey," Henry said grimly. "A month on the wagon has convinced me I can take it or leave it. I mean to go on leaving it, from now on."

He saw a long glance pass between the girl and big Ed Prentice, a glance that held the promise of many things for the future.

"Give me a hand with Doc here, Ed," he suggested. "'Fore I go back to the shop, we'll tote him down to the gutter."

"What for?" Ed said, still gazing at Nancy.

"Why, it'll be kind of a laugh, a snobbish sort like Doc comin' to in the gutter. Besides," Henry added, "three's a crowd, ain't it?"

"It is," Ed admitted, moving to help him while Nancy watched.

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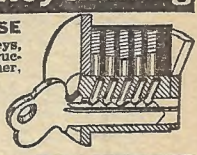

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(Continued from page 100)

Deck and Pete Merkel, and rode after them.

The young trail boss found himself sitting his horse in the deep and pleasant silence that descended suddenly over the scene where violence had been. Deck relaxed, thoughtfully replacing his gun. He pulled his horse about. Now he could concentrate on the drive. Two hundred more miles and, barring bandits, sandstorms, prairie fire or stampede, he'd get these critters home. He'd drive the damned bawling varmints right into Double A ranch yard. Yes, damn him, right into Grandpa's parlor where the old man would be sitting, nursing his crippled leg, looking ferocious so's to try to hide his secret pride in his grandson. Deck couldn't help a weary grin coming at the thought of it—a thousand wild steers—the steers he'd offered to cram down Muntzon's surprised throat—trying to crowd into Grandpa Blocker's dignified ranch parlor.

Pete coughed. "You won't need us any more," he mumbled. And Deck saw then that Jean was riding up on a horse from the remuda, and that both of them were watching him with something—maybe respect—showing in their eyes.

"I want Dad to retire from trail riding," Jean said slowly. "No more of that for him! I guess we'll head back for Santone now, Deck."

Pete grinned and bit the end of his mustache when he heard Deck's slow answer. Deck was looking hard at Jean, and the blue in his eyes was no longer icy—it was deep and glowing, and he was feeling an anvil weight lift from his shoulders.

"You two are coming to Double A," Deck said firmly. "Pete can sit on the front porch with Grandpa the rest of his life. Grandpa told me, Jean, that rule number four is, *never let anything get away from you once you've got it!*"

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